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5/6



PAT STALL

CONTACT

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This issue is dedicated to STAR TREK: THE MOTION PICTURE, and to the creators who will make the Kirk/Spock relationship happen again. To new beginnings and bright sunrises and silver birds warping across a starlit void. It is for dreams fulfilled and dreams with visions and those who dare to make them come true.

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*C*limb to the heights of your fantasy
*O*n silver wings sail to the limitless
*N*ow of your imagination
*T*omorrow is fulfilled
*A*gain we reach out toward
*C*ompletion of the dream
*T*ogether!

IN LOVING MEMORIUM TO OUR FATHER

HARRY EDWARD OTT

April, 1910 - March, 1978

Who believed in CONTACT from the
beginning, and who shared the dream.

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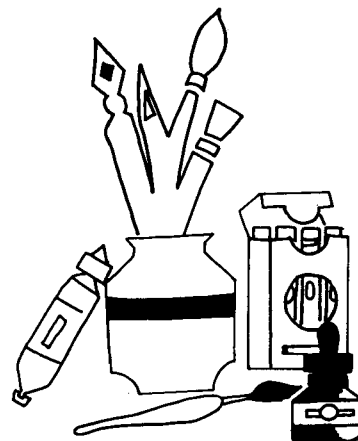


HOME IS THE HUNTER.....Beverly J. Volker & Nancy J. Kippax

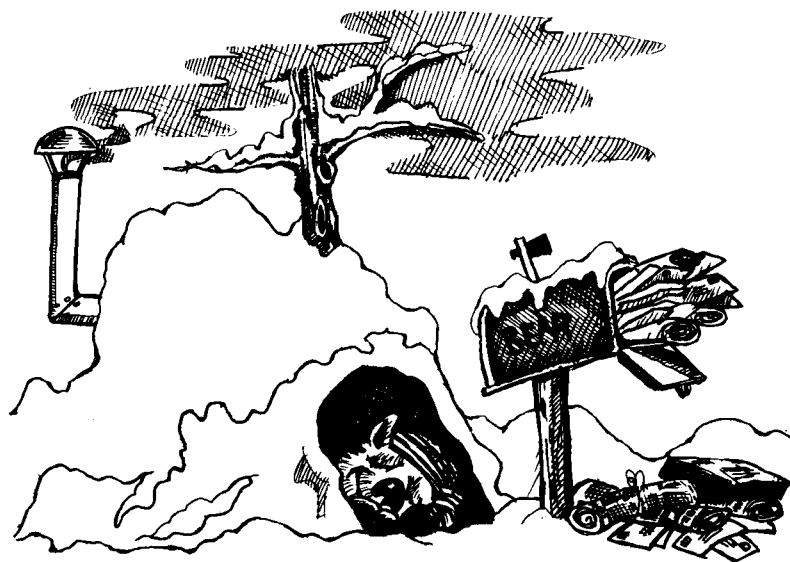
Illustrated by Merle T. Decker

AFTERMATH, a song by Martha J. Bonds

FRONT COVERS: Pat Stall
BACK COVER: Mike Verina
CARTOONS: Linda White



EDITORS' PAGE



It's been a long road, folks, but we finally made it! The very last thing a zine editor does in each issue is write the Editors' Page. It's a kind of summing up, a chance to reflect on the things that have taken place during the efforts to publish the zine. It's also a place to include the editors' comments, feelings and thanks. This time our "page" would span two years, for our last issue, CONTACT 4, was published in September, 1977. As we said, it's been a long road, often fraught with problems and disappointments, often filled with pleasure and excitement, but as you now hold in your hands the finished product, it is, for us, most of all extremely gratifying. We made it home!

This should be an exciting time for Trekfen as we anticipate the coming of the Motion Picture. It, too, has been a long journey for all of us since the cancellation of the series in 1969. Loyalty, determination, an unfailing spirit have been rewarded, and we're almost there. What a thrilling achievement to see at last the reunion of those characters/people who have filled our dreams and inspired our fantasies for so long.

This issue of CONTACT is a celebration -- of the triumph of the fans, the efforts of the editors and contributors, the rebirth of a dream, but most of all of the continuation of the Kirk/Spock relationship. Without that, there would be no STAR TREK as we know it.

The theme of this issue is 'coming home', a new beginning, the phoenix rising from its ashes -- although that's not a completely accurate analogy, for the 'old' is not dead, but we think you understand our implication. True to our theme, we have not included any major 'somebody-dies' stories. There *is* one small vignette, but it was so heart-wrenchingly sad we couldn't resist. And, while we think you will be able to 'hurt-so-good' through most of our contents, we also feel the stories and poetry are very positive, up-lifting and satisfying. (Don't panic -- we didn't say this was a 'happy' issue!)

We have chosen a symbolic cover this time, and we compliment Pat Stall's talent in designing the double cover. Because CONTACT is about 'two' people, what could be more appropriate than two covers: one blue and one gold, representing the standard uniforms of the Captain and First Officer in the series (the Colors of Love).

The 'first' cover depicts a very lonely Kirk, among the broken letters of CONTACT, dreaming of an absent friend and perhaps melancholy over what had been, and filled with anxiety about the future. It is symbolic of the 'blue days' we all remember, when the future of TREK -- as a series, as a motion picture with the return of the entire cast (and one Vulcan in particular) was uncertain. It was at this time that the future of CONTACT, also, was uncertain, and after the publication of number four, we faced the dilemma of whether or not to do another issue.

But happily, the days of indecision and uncertainty were resolved, and the 'second' cover symbolizes a golden rebirth, the dawn of reunion, re-vitalization of a dream. With all this enthusiasm, how could we not add our support and publish another issue! The solid stone letters that spell out CONTACT 5/6 represent the solidity of fandom and the creators of TREK, united as one to make it live again.

We decided to make this a double issue because in the past two years we accumulated enough material for one issue and then we wrote a novella which was large enough to publish as a separate CONTACT. They are both included under one binding -- *voilà*, a double issue.

We'd like to apologize for the omission of two stories, by Leslie Fish and Leslye Lilker, mentioned in our flyers. Both had problems that didn't get resolved in time for us to print, but we'd like to thank them for their efforts and since both stories were excellent we hope you'll be seeing them published elsewhere very soon.

And now, as we take off our shoes, put up our feet and relax by the fireside, we revel in the joy of being home. Before we close this editorial and let you become immersed in the contents, we'd like to acknowledge some very special thanks to some very special people who went that extra mile with us:

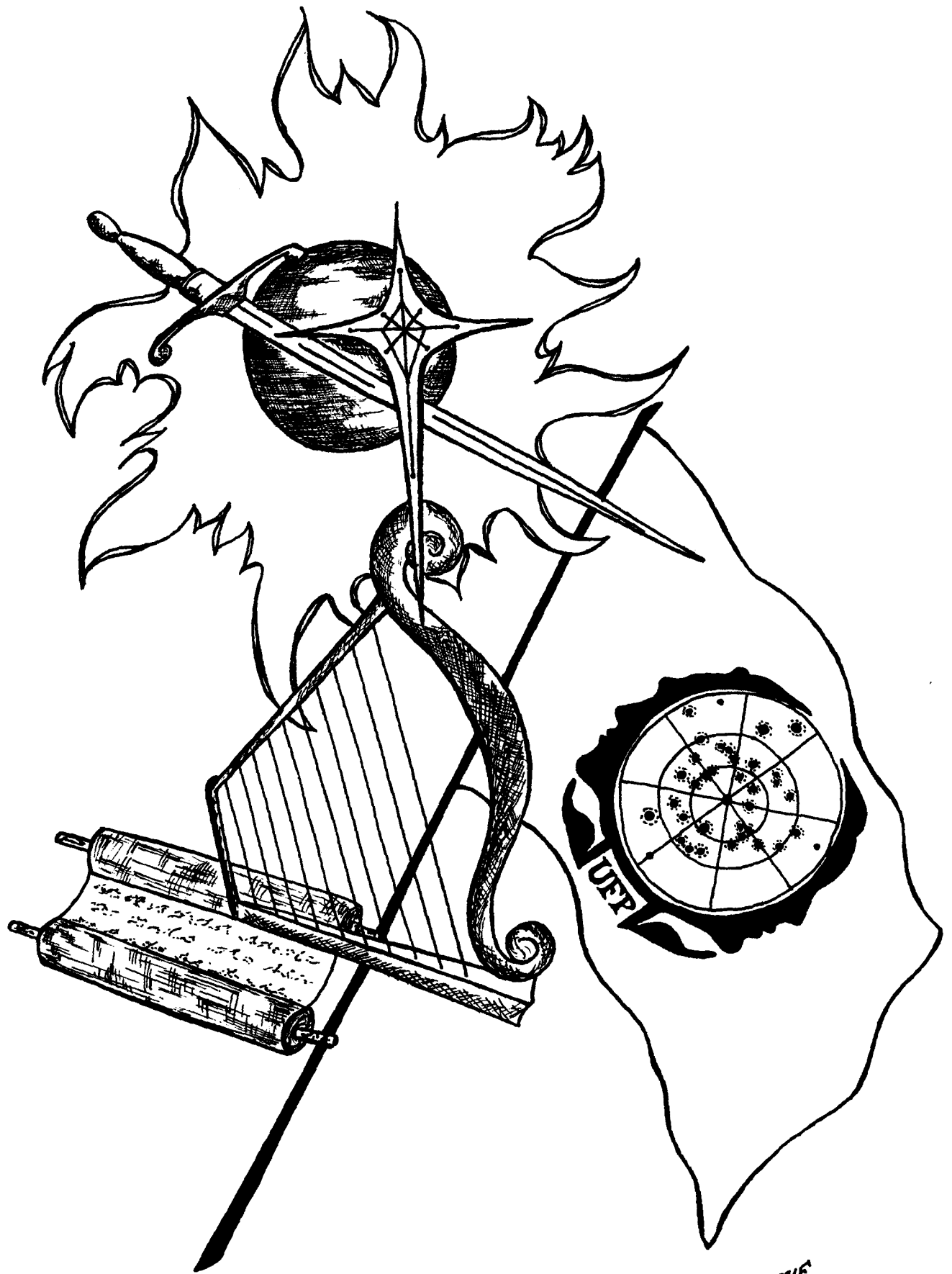
- Terry Sylvester and Margaret DeLorenzo, for their invaluable proof-reading, hauling, and uncountable 'extras'.
- Bonnie Davis, for transportation, borders, and so much more!
- Mike Verina, for having the covers printed, and for bringing them to Baltimore, despite his taxing schedule to finish his own zine.
- Carol Frisbie (We won't elaborate -- Carol, we love ya!)
- Martha Bonds, especially for writing our new CONTACT song, 'We Are One', for so much -- (What would we do without her?)
- Laurie Huff, for answering our plea for more illos -- ah, another zine ed understands!
- Liz Frim and Sonia Gingras, also for answering our plea for more art and calligraphy -- count 'em, folks -- NINE poems!
- Alice Jones, for meeting our deadline (Fandom, please note!)
- Carolyn Venino, for allowing us to reprint 'our' song pages from PASTAK
- AUNT CLARA, who more than qualifies as competition to Amanda and Sarek's InterGalactic Babysitting service -- she made many conventions possible.

One more thing we'd like to add. Our plans for another issue of CONTACT do not exist at this time- We will be publishing The Complete Rack and Phase II Collected, and filling some commitments to other zines for contributions. Beyond that, we have several ideas in the 'talking stage', but please do not send us SASE's or contributions for a CONTACT 7. We are accepting neither at this time, and if in the future our plans become more definite, we will notify the fen.

Thank you for your loyalty, your support and encouragement. Enjoy!

We are One -- We Reach,

*Bev,
Nancy*



CKE
C. 23

And of the Stars

Dream Weaver ~ Tomorrow's Sun
History writes your legend
In tales of Ancient Gods...
And those who thought themselves to be...
Of mighty warriors, soldiers, Knights of the Realm,
Crusaders dedicated to a noble quest,
Songs of glory, heroic deeds,
The past recorded by One who stood at the side
Of those Giants Among Men...
Hephaestion, Lancelot, Jonathan.
Was their light shadowed
By one of greater brilliance?
Then who shall be the one to write
The Future's Legend?
For there is no shadow, but a reflection,
At the side of this One
Who commands the Stars.

BEV VOLKER

WOE TO HIM WHO IS ALONE

BY LINDA WHITE

Tohbee, Manship 419, awoke with a start. The steady thrum of his engines did nothing to reassure him. He probed his memory banks, hoping against hope that the machine part of him would recall things differently than the flesh. But it was not the same. The alien ship had overpowered him. Overpowered them. Not even their Completion had been enough to thwart the huge vessel.

The memory of it pained him. There were many at home who thought other races, if they existed, to be savages. But he and Kaylin had believed differently. They had set out to contact other life forms, secure in the knowledge that they would be welcomed as friends. Was it not true that hostility led only to the Empty Death? Was not life dependent upon the friendly touch of others?

These aliens were different. No friendly welcome. No questions to determine origin or intent. Instant hatred, blasted at them by some kind of weapon. It had scorched his hull. They had fired again. The second blast overheated some of his circuits and the flesh Tohbee had lapsed into unconsciousness, leaving the machine Tohbee to deal with matters. A mere machine to help Kaylin.

"Kaylin, can you forgive me?"

Silence.

Something was terribly wrong. Afraid of what he might learn, but needing to know, he began an interior scan. Section by section, he probed his own depths. When he had finished, he ran it again. At last, he switched off his sensors. It was pointless to run it a third time.

He was empty. No one was aboard. Never before in his Manship existence had he regretted being more machine than flesh. Until now. For now he had tears to weep, but no eyes to shed them.

* * * * *

Kordov, Commander, and occasional supplier of specialties to the Empire, was furious with himself. He had let greed overtake his common sense, and now he was stuck with an indestructible alien. He paced back and forth in the narrow confines of his bridge. It had seemed like such a good idea. The creature was not of a Federation race. Therefore the chances of repercussions were nil. He was massive, and yet of a manageable size. With conditioning, he could have had a varied future -- mine worker, body guard, or source of amusement to the Emperor himself. At the very least, they could set new troupes against him in hand to hand combat to test their mettle.

There were only two problems. One, the creature's size made his rage extremely dangerous. And two, not even phaser fire could stop him. Set on stun, it merely annoyed him. A sustained blast on kill might do away with him. But a short blast only burnt holes in his thick hide and threw him into another rage.

A very agitated young officer approached, made a stiff little bow, and waited to be recognized.

"Yes, what is it?" snarled Kordov. He was in a black mood.

"Sir, the creature. It beats the walls of its confinement area. We fear that soon he will brave the force field and break out into the ship."

Kordov sighed heavily. "Very well. We will get rid of this nuisance once and for all." He was about to order the alien beamed into space when a delicious thought occurred to him. Their present course would take them near an archaeological dig, established by the Federation... What did they call it? N-37.

The Federation would mean Earthers. Laughing to himself, he gave the appropriate orders. How amusing. Yes, he would get rid of their uncooperative captive, and at the same time, give some Earthers a colossal headache.

"Commander, we approach the planet."

"Scan it. Locate the archaeological dig on which the Earthers are working. I don't want to take a chance on our beast not running into them."

"I have a population cluster located, Commander. But there is also something else -- "

"What? Out with it."

"A strange reading, Commander. I cannot explain it."

Kordov bent over the sensor viewer. The reading was certainly bizarre. And yet, it was familiar. He had seen that reading before, but where? It irritated him that the cause did not come immediately to mind. However, it could not be too important. He straightened. "Prepare the beast for transport to the planet's surface." It was enough that he had found an opportunity to annoy and possibly do permanent damage to members of the Federation.

As his men scurried to obey his orders, he sighed. Ordinarily, mischief was beneath him. But life was so dull since the Organian treaty...

* * * * *

Kirk leaned back on his bunk, pillow plumped behind his head, half empty glass cupped in one palm. He sighed heavily. It had been a long day. The boring ones were the worst. What was this need he had for constant activity, non-stop excitement? He made a concentrated effort to enjoy the peace and quiet.

It wasn't as hard as he had expected. Spock had pulled a book off the shelf and was moving toward the bunk, his brow furrowed in concentration. He turned the pages one after the other, his eyes scanning each quickly. As he lowered himself to sit cross-legged on the foot of the bunk, Kirk caught the title on the spine: Don Quixote.

"How do you like it?"

"It is a shame that such high ideals were anchored in a sea of insanity."

The Captain smiled. "You shouldn't form an opinion before reading the entire novel."

"I read both books as a child," Spock answered absently, still turning pages.

Kirk's smile broadened into a grin. He wasn't really surprised. Spock stopped reading and faced him as he added, "I found it somewhat confusing."

"That's because you were raised with logic instead of fantasy. I think, though, if you re-read it now, after your long exposure to humans, you might find it more understandable."

"Perhaps. However, Sancho Panza has not changed. He is as ludicrous on these pages as on those of my mother's edition."

"Still," countered Kirk, "he had many redeeming qualities." His hazel eyes twinkled with amusement. "After all, he was the one whose roots were sunk in reality. And he was exceedingly loyal to Don Quixote, whether the old man deserved it or not."

The faintest hint of a smile threatened the corners of Spock's mouth as he responded, "I also find certain aspects of Don Quixote reminiscent of you."

Kirk chuckled. "The idealism or the insanity?"

The beep of the intercom postponed Spock's response. In one fluid movement the captain was off the bunk and flipping a toggle. "Kirk here."

"Needed on the bridge, Captain." It was Scotty's voice.

"On my way. Kirk out." He turned at the door. "Coming, Spock?"

The night shift was manning the bridge. Scott stood by the command chair, hands folded behind his back. As the captain headed for the con, he began.

"Distress signal from planet N-37, this quadrant, sir. Some sort of archaeological dig. No security provisions. They've found something they think is pretty exciting, and now they've been attacked by some kind of beastie. Whatever they've found down there, they feel it warrants starship protection." Then, almost as an afterthought, he added, "They're also fearing for their lives, sir."

"All right, gentlemen," Kirk said. "Let's lend a helping hand. Navigator?"

"Course laid in, sir."

"Good. Ahead, warp factor six. Mr. Faxon, what's our ETA?"

"At warp six, four hours, sir."

"Very well. I'll be in my quarters. Mr. Scott, she's yours." He headed for the turbolift. "Spock?"

His friend joined him. He entered the lift and smiled. "Now, where were we?"

The doors whooshed shut as Spock answered, "You had just asked me what I believe is called a 'loaded' question."

* * * * *

Tohbee ignored the loneliness for as long as he could. He checked all his systems one by one to keep his mind off his emptiness. He reviewed his star charts carefully, spending several pleasant minutes plotting a course for home.

"No. Not home. Not yet. First I must find Kaylin."

The searing blasts of hate from the alien ship had not done much harm. Some of his outer hull had been damaged. But it was nothing that would impede his search.

He let his computer systems take over, extrapolating a likely course for the alien ship, while his flesh worried about his friend.

Kaylin was strong, an independent thinker, and capable of handling any situation that might arise among their own people. But with these aliens... Even Tohbee's impression of them had been

that of hate-filled entities. And yet, they survived! How could it be? Beings who actually lived without Completion? If that was so, what would happen to Kaylin?

Automatically, his computers fed him their probable course information, and he moved his machine bulk through space in the indicated direction.

"I am coming, Kaylin."

Then it happened. A chilling, horrifying thought. If these beings could live without Completion, if they truly did not need each other in order to survive, then perhaps they would consider Kaylin totally unnecessary. Perhaps they would... end his existence. Destroy him. As one destroys an asteroid too large to be deflected by ordinary screens.

"No! Kaylin, you must live! You must!"

As if the very action would help protect his friend, he readied his defensive weaponry. Systems accustomed to blasting only asteroids and space hazards were reprogrammed for alien vessels. It was a grim, saddened Manship who moved through the void, wishing he/they had never left home.

* * * * *

Kirk sat in his command chair with the relaxed air of a man who had had eight hours of sleep, not three. He smiled reassuringly at the archaeologist on the viewscreen.

"We are ready to beam you and your find up to the ship, Dr. Vandermeer. If you need help getting things together, I have a security team standing by to assist you."

"You don't understand, Captain. We cannot use the transporter."

Kirk was momentarily speechless. "I... beg your pardon?"

Vandermeer seemed upset. "Please, Captain. You must see what we have found here. And you might want to bring someone with you who is familiar with Vulcan history. With this monster running around, I'd prefer that you come armed. Also, you will need a shuttlecraft to transport our discovery."

The captain shot Spock a glance. The Vulcan seemed fascinated by the archaeologist's speech. Turning back to Vandermeer, Kirk went on.

"This creature you mentioned... Has it hurt anyone? Do you need medical help?"

"No, Captain. No injuries. So far its attacks have consisted of lumbering charges, threatening gestures... We've managed to avoid the thing. But it's so massive. And..."

"Yes? Go on."

"It makes the most hideous, mournful wail. It showed up thirty-six hours ago. Woke us up in the dead of night with its caterwauling."

"I see." He began to wonder how much of this beast would turn out to be the overactive imaginations of some isolated scientists. "Very well, Doctor, my science officer and I will be down shortly in a shuttlecraft to investigate your find and your uninvited guest. Kirk out." He left the con, moving for the turbolift. "Mr. Spock, how's your Vulcan history?"

"Excellent, Captain."

"I thought so," he smiled. "Mr. Scott, you're in charge. We'll keep in touch."

* * * * *

Kordov sighed. Boredom weighed heavily upon him. He sipped his drink, swishing it back and forth in his mouth. He longed for the excitement of a war. Damned Organians, anyway, butting

in where they were not wanted.

He stared into the purple liquid in his goblet. Perhaps the Emperor would decide to go to war against the Romulans. No, that would be unwise. The Romulans would like that too much. They were formidable adversaries. Still, matters between the two Empires had not been ideal lately...

Romulans! That was it!

He banged the goblet down on the table and left for his bridge. Of course! How could his memory be so faulty? The strange sensor readings on N-37... He had seen them only once before. Long ago he had had occasion to witness the passing of the flagship of the Romulan Praetor. Relations between the two Empires had been on much better footing then. He was a young officer, and had asked about the strange sensor readings. Caused by the Praetor's royal jewels, he was told. Irreplaceable stones, passed down from Romulan beginnings. Priceless. Treasured by the Romulans above all things.

So, the archaeologists had discovered something of value on that barren little rock. Well, he would see to it that they shared the wealth. Such a find would delight the Romulans. At this point, anything that would delight the Romulans would delight the Emperor.

He snapped out orders that turned his ship around and sent them speeding back to N-37. Suddenly, life seemed much more interesting.

* * * * *

N-37 was a hot, dry place with occasional patches of shade provided by rock outcroppings and caves. What breeze there was scorched the lungs. Stepping out of the shuttlecraft, Kirk braced himself against the onslaught of heat. Spock, however, breathed deeply and welcomed the warmth.

"This planet reminds me of Vulcan," said Kirk, obviously not delighted.

"Indeed," commented Spock. "There are great similarities." He lifted his tricorder and began a scan.

"There's Vandermeer," Kirk said. "Let's go."

Spock was staring at the instrument, his eyes round with disbelief.

"Spock? What is it?"

He shook his head slowly, then looked up at Vandermeer, a few feet ahead at the top of a rise. "I wondered if this was the reason you requested a shuttlecraft. Then I discounted the idea as totally impossible."

"It's true." The archaeologist looked very tired. The responsibility for the discovery had been wearing him down.

"Gentlemen, what the hell are we talking about?"

"This way, Captain," motioned Vandermeer. "I'll show you."

He led them up an incline into a cave. Kirk heaved a sigh of relief as the temperature dropped fifteen degrees. It was still hot, but compared to the outside, this was imminently preferable. Vandermeer was talking to Spock as they moved farther back into the cave.

"The dig is back here. Evidently these artifacts were stored for safekeeping at one time. There is very little moisture on the planet, but over the thousands of years, natural erosion has caused a certain amount of settling. It appears that some kind of violent earth tremor brought part of the cave roof down. The rubble from the cave-in is mainly what we've been trying to dig through on this site."

"What brought you here in the first place?" asked Kirk.

"The original survey team found some ruins of what appeared to be stone shelters. Our investigations led us into the caves."

Another man and two women were waiting for them in their camp area. They approached to be introduced.

"Captain Kirk, Mr. Spock, these are my associates, Ors. Saito, Hagar and Verma."

Spock had been growing more and more impatient, although Kirk was the only one who noticed. "Doctor Vandermeer, may we see your discovery?"

"Of course. This way." He led them further back into the cave. "It's sitting just where we found it. You can see that the area was used for gatherings of some sort, probably of a religious nature. But Mr. Spock should know more about that."

Mr. Spock, however, was not listening. Kirk watched him move slowly toward the familiar looking statue in the center of a stone circle. There was great concentration on the Vulcan's face as he approached, one hand outstretched, longing already to touch the figure. It perched on a small pedestal that had been carved out of the floor of the cave. The statue itself was about two feet high.

The captain's gaze shifted from Spock momentarily. Was he seeing things, or did the figure begin to glow? He stared hard at it. It resembled a giant piece of carved opal in this light. Light? Wait a minute! The archaeologists hadn't brought any lamps back with them!

Inches away from the statue, Spock stopped. Now the light emanating from its surface was quite noticeable.

"Spock, what is that stuff?"

The answer came in a whisper. "Abri'in." He reached out hesitantly, pulling back once or twice as if afraid to touch it. At last his fingertips brushed the surface of the figure. The stone throbbed with color. The twinkling of theabri'in was reflected in Spock's dark eyes as he laid both palms against its surface. The entire figure came alive with warm and glowing colors, as if elaborately lit from within.

Kirk moved closer until he was standing beside his friend. There was a reverence in the saffron features, a feeling of wonder expressed in the rounded eyes. His face flushed green with excitement. Affected by Spock's attitude, Kirk spoke in hushed tones.

"It looks like the fire pot in your quarters."

"It represents the same ancient god," said Spock. His eyes were glued to the statue.

"Abri'in. I've heard stories about it. I thought it was illegal to remove this stuff from Vulcan."

"It is."

"Then how -- "

Vandermeer answered him, breaking the quiet mood with his eagerness. "That's just it, Captain Kirk. This and the other relics are immensely old. They've spent thousands of years right here, so they were removed quite some time ago."

Spock had not changed position since laying hands on theabri'in. His voice seemed thick and sluggish. "This figure has been missing since the time of the Reform. It was rumored that those who found the ways of logic unbearable left Vulcan and took certain holy items with them. This... was... one."

Kirk was watching him closely. The figure appeared to have some kind of hold on him.

"Spock?"

There was no response. Kirk reached out and touched his arm, repeating more firmly, "Spock!"

The Vulcan stirred, turning to look at his captain, the warm expression initiated by the abri'in growing warmer as he gazed at his friend.

"Jim," he said softly, seemingly unaware of Vandermeer and the others, "touch it."

The softness in his eyes and the gentleness in his voice were compelling. With a trace of a smile, Kirk reached out to the statue. The pressing of his flesh illicit a dizzying display of vibrant, pulsating colors.

Spock's expression softened even more as his Captain's eyes grew wide with wonder.

"Abri'in is said to reflect the personality of the one who touches it," Spock murmured. "I see that it is true."

Vandermeer had to move into Kirk's line of vision to get his attention. "I'm pleased that you are both capable of appreciating our discovery. But we must move this piece to the safety of the Enterprise as quickly as possible."

"You expect trouble?" asked Kirk, pulling his hands reluctantly off the abri'in.

Verma, a small East Indian, answered. "We have no way of knowing where the wailing creature comes from. Perhaps it is a decoy of some kind -- "

"Yes," said Kirk, "what about this creature? Spock, did you get any other life form readings when we arrived?"

The Vulcan stiffened ever so slightly. The movement told Kirk he was embarrassed. "I... neglected to scan for the creature. I read the abri'in and -- "

Kirk smiled. "No need to explain. Scan for it now."

"We will have to move outside, sir. The proximity of the abri'in disrupts the tricorder."

Evening shadows were stretching out across the land as Spock activated his tricorder and swung it slowly before him in a wide arc, then back a few degrees.

"There, in that direction. Probably concealed in that concentration of boulders."

As if to confirm his readings, a low mournful wail came to them on the warm breeze, rising in pitch and intensity to a sustained outpouring of deep sadness. It pricked the hairs on the nape of Kirk's neck.

"The thing either howled or moaned almost constantly last night," said Vandermeer.

"Is it humanoid?" asked Kirk. Before Spock could answer, Vandermeer did.

"Yes, I suppose it qualifies. Hideous, though. It roams around out there, trying to get to us in the dark. We'd better get the abri'in to safety."

The archaeologists turned to move back to the dig. The captain stood for a moment, listening to the grief carried by the wind. After a minute, he noticed Spock was watching him.

"Is something wrong, Captain?"

"Hmm? Oh, nothing, I guess. It just sounds so... so... "

"Lonely?" Spock supplied.

"Yes," he said softly. Then he straightened a bit. "Come on, let's get that statue on the shuttlecraft. We'll look for the owner of that voice after everything is secure."

* * * * *

Tohbee's automatic systems were shutting down. He shook off the urge to end his pain and forced his circuits to remain active. If the separation was affecting him this badly, what must

it be doing to Kaylin? His friend was all flesh. There would be no optional shutting down for Kaylin. And therefore, none for Tohbee.

But the loneliness was taking its toll. The Empty Death was reaching out to him, ready to suck him in. He had never been so frightened. Not even after the accident that had destroyed his body and left his mind holding tenuously to life. He had been constantly surrounded by other people, their compassion and love washing over him, strengthening him, easing the shock of losing his body. Their constant caring had made the choice of becoming a ManShip seem like the only thing to do. The alternative, death, was never even mentioned. Through the worst of it, when touching him must have caused others anguish, he was never denied Completion. Kaylin was always there.

"Kaylin! I'm coming. How you must be suffering. All alone. I won't leave you. I'll find you somehow. If only I could think clearly!"

An emergency circuit activated, roaring through the flesh of his brain. An alien vessel was approaching him. Or was he approaching it? It didn't matter. He scanned the other ship, hoping against hope that the readings would be familiar. But no. Totally alien. No Kaylin!

His anguish was such that, when his automatic systems activated to fire on the non-hostile vessel, he did not countermand.

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It took Kirk and Spock only a few minutes to move the statue. Spock could have done it alone. But the abri'in had such a soporific effect on him that Kirk helped just to see that his friend didn't slow down to a complete stop before securing the figure in the shuttlecraft. They had just returned to the cave when Scott called from the Enterprise.

"Captain, we've received a distress call from a passenger vessel. She's been attacked by an alien ship, configuration unknown. Do you wish to beam aboard before we assist her?"

"No, Scotty. We can't transport the special cargo, so -- "

"Ahh. So, it is abri'in."

"You know about it?"

"Aye. It wreaks havoc with transporters and sensors. Since the act of beaming destroys the sensitivity of the stone, I figured that had to be the cargo when Vandermeer insisted on a shuttlecraft."

"Oh." Kirk was beginning to feel like everyone but him knew about this abri'in.

"Shall I beam you up without the cargo, sir?"

"No, Scotty. We'll be fine. We have two phasers. So far this creature hasn't made an appearance, and no one here has been hurt. But until we can determine what threat it represents, we have to safeguard the abri'in. Spock and Vandermeer both feel it's pretty important, so we're staying. You take the ship and help that passenger vessel. We'll arrange a rendezvous on your return. Kirk out."

The shadows had expanded into dusk. The temperature was already more bearable. Spock was scanning for the creature again.

"Well," said Kirk, "it looks like Vandermeer has two more uninvited guests for the evening." There was no answer. He smiled softly, watching the Vulcan worry the tricorder controls. "What's so fascinating?"

"Our friend is moving closer." Spock looked up from the tricorder, gazing off toward the boulders.

"And -- ?"

The dark eyes were tinged with sadness. "He's dying."

Vandermeer's voice was harsh. "Good. Then it won't be any more trouble."

Kirk and Spock turned to look at the man. Spock was confused. "Sir, am I to understand that you are pleased by the probable death of another living being?"

"Well, not the way you put it, no. But it would simplify things for us if the beast weren't here."

Kirk decided Vandermeer was an easy man to dislike. "You keep referring to this being as a beast, a monster. So far I've seen no indication that he is any threat at all."

Vandermeer's face went white. He pointed behind them, into the gathering dark. "Oh, no? Well, take a look, gentlemen, before you head into the cave!" With that, he scurried for the safety of his camp.

Kirk stared hard at the shadows, but could barely make out a movement. Yet he knew the exact moment when Spock sighted the thing, because a strong hand gripped his arm and began steering him toward the mouth of the cave.

"Jim, I would suggest we retreat for the time being."

"What does he look like?" asked Kirk, peering back over his shoulder.

"Large, but definitely humanoid." There was a tightness in Spock's voice that hadn't been there before. Kirk looked sidelong at him, trying to make out his face in the dim light from the cave lamps. The lips were drawn in a thin line. Something was wrong.

Inside the mouth of the cave, Kirk turned and took his arms. "Spock, you're in pain."

Before Spock could answer, the creature outside howled mournfully, and the Vulcan moaned and crumpled, as if the sound itself had struck him. Kirk lowered him to the ground, pulling his phaser, aiming at the sound.

"Jim, no." The voice was barely audible, but Kirk didn't fire.

"What's wrong?" he asked. "What happened?" Why the hell hadn't he brought McCoy along?

"He's dying. His feelings are very strong. And he broadcasts them! Even more than humans." Spock gasped for air, as if breathing was difficult. Then, with a look of great concentration, he regained control.

"Are you all right?"

"I strengthened my mental shields against the onslaught. I was not prepared for the intensity of his... his feelings."

"Is he telepathic?"

"No. Not any more than you are."

"But I can receive telepathic messages that *you* put out. And I didn't feel anything. If he's broadcasting thoughts -- "

"Not thoughts. Feelings." He started to get up. Kirk stood and offered him a helping hand. "And you did feel something, Jim. I could tell. Every time he wailed, you felt compassion."

"Is he an empath, then?"

"I don't know. I think not, not in the sense that Gem was an empath. And he's certainly not mute." The thing wailed again. Kirk could see Spock tense with the sound. Unconsciously, he moved a little closer to his friend.

Vandermeer's voice boomed behind them. "I see you took my advice. It seems to be getting bolder. You'd better keep your phasers handy. It'll probably try to get into the cave tonight."

He cast one final look in the direction of the unseen creature, then turned and rejoined the others.

Spock swayed slightly. The captain steadied him. "Anything I can do?"

"Perhaps it would help if we moved further into the cave. Distance seems to lessen the effect." He let the captain support him as they moved beyond the camp.

* * * * *

Kordov was not surprised when his sensors told him that two more Earthers had joined the archaeologists. The presence of the shuttlecraft made it obvious they were Starfleet personnel. There was no starship in orbit, but with that shuttlecraft down there, it couldn't be far away. He would have to act fast.

"We will not need a landing craft," he informed the stiff backed young officer who attended him. "One has been provided for us by the Federation. We will beam down a party and take the craft. The precious stone has been very handily stored inside it."

"Commander, those who landed that craft will surely have weapons -- "

"Don't worry, Kazz, I don't intend to lose any people on so simple a mission. The Earthers are all together in a group. And our friendly beast is nearby. Lock the ship's phasers on them."

"Yes, Commander. Ready, sir."

Kordov waited a moment before giving the order. Things were seldom this neat and easy. He wanted to savor it. Yes, how pleasant. Destroy the witnesses, beam down, take the shuttlecraft, and go home with a present for the Emperor and the Romulans. He sighed a satisfied sigh.

"Fire."

* * * * *

Jim Kirk opened his eyes and saw nothing. For one terrifying second, he thought he was blind. Then he remembered where he was and what had happened. "Spock?" He tried to call the name aloud, but it came out a choked whisper, and he coughed up dust. Then he tried again. "Spock, where are you?"

There was no answer. Fighting off the urge to panic, he pushed himself up on his hands and knees. Dust and small stones cascaded off his back onto the stone floor of the cave. A quick inventory told him he was badly bruised, but nothing appeared to be broken. Assured that he could function, he began to move slowly, reaching out to feel the area around him, hoping desperately that Spock had fared as well.

The total blackness hurt his eyes. Off to his left he came up against a pile of huge boulders loosed by the cave-in. He couldn't remember exactly where Spock had been when it happened. Turning away from the boulders, he didn't want to remember. Better to continue his blind man's bluff, assuming there was a reason. He tried not to think about where the archaeologists were or how long the air would last. First things first.

At last his hand landed on something that was not stone or hard packed dirt. His fingers trembling, he ran them down the length of it and found a hand. The flesh was warm. He wondered frantically if he'd been unconscious long. A body can't get cold in five minutes.

He cut himself off. Knowing it was next to impossible to find a pulse in a Vulcan wrist, he tried anyway. He was almost afraid to run his hands the other way, toward the shoulder. What if -- ?

Damnit! Do it. Find out. Slowly, deliberately, he began his exploration. Over the shoulder, up the neck to the ear. He let his hand linger there a moment. That ear made it Spock beyond a doubt. Gently, he moved his hand in front of his friend's face. His heart was pounding wildly.

He calmed himself and waited. He didn't realize he was holding his breath until he felt the tickle of Spock's respiration on his fingers, and released a lungful of stale air in a heartfelt sigh of relief.

Knowing Spock was alive made the situation seem less terrible somehow, and he relaxed a bit. Gently, he brushed the dirt and dust off his friend's unseen features. He ran his hands carefully over the rest of the body, grateful that nothing seemed obviously wrong. Then once more he called his name. "Spock?" No answer. He touched one cheek softly, letting the warm flesh reassure him. Then he sat back to wait.

"Jim?" The loneliness in the voice made the cave seem even darker than it was.

"I'm right here, Spock." He gripped the Vulcan's hand.

"What happened?"

"Cave-in. Are you all right?"

"I believe so. Somewhat bruised, however. What about the others?"

"Dead. They must be. We're cut off from the mouth of the cave. They were at the campsite, between us and the outside."

Spock extricated his hand gently from Kirk's in order to sit up. When he spoke again, his voice was on a level with Kirk's head. "This cave was not unstable. And I felt no earth tremor."

"I know. Just before the lights went out, I thought I heard the whir of phasers."

"Interesting."

"How long have we been in here?"

Spock was silent for a moment, then said, "Two hours thirteen minutes."

Kirk sighed. "Maybe the Enterprise will make it back before -- "

"Before the air is gone? I think not."

There was a painful silence. Kirk felt Spock's hand seeking out his own. He wished there were some light. He wanted to see his friend's face, look into those dark eyes, watch the mouth soften into almost-a-smile. Not that they had anything to smile about.

Without eye contact, touching was the only way to reassure each other. Spock leaned into his captain, and Kirk responded by settling an arm around his shoulders.

"I don't suppose there is any chance of digging our way out," said Kirk. He could almost feel the bemused smile on Spock's face.

"We would undoubtedly exhaust our air supply before we could make much progress."

"Pretty hopeless, huh?" He felt the Vulcan relaxing against him. The deep voice was very close to his ear when Spock murmured, "Where there is life, there is still hope."

"Be careful," the captain said gently. "McCoy will accuse you of being emotional."

"It must be the constant exposure."

The darkness no longer seemed a threat. It was more like a comfortable friend, cloaking them from the light of duty and propriety, enveloping them in a soft blanket of mutual affection. Kirk hugged Spock to him, reaching up with his free hand to pull the Vulcan's face close to his own. He placed his dry lips against an unseen temple and inhaled his friend's fragrance.

"It could be worse, you know," he said softly, thinking that one of them could be lost and alone, body shattered, under the stones, unable to reach the other one.

"Yes," said Spock. "I know."



* * * * *

Montgomery Scott didn't like the situation one bit. He stood staring at the viewscreen as if it could supply the answers, but all he saw was the usual field of stars. Dr. McCoy came onto the bridge and moved purposefully toward him.

"What's this I hear about losing contact with the Captain?"

"Aye, Doctor. Something has happened to the 'archaeologists' transmitter, that's for sure. We kinna raise 'em."

"Aren't we going back?"

Scotty sighed. "That we are. But not until we get this passenger vessel to a starbase."

"They could be in big trouble. Didn't they say something about a monster? What if -- "

"Doctor, you and I both know there's no sich thing as monsters. They did mention some kind of alien before they left."

"Possibly hostile," McCoy added pointedly.

"We'll find out in sixteen hours. That's how long I estimate it will be before we can get back to N-37." His voice was brusque, his words clipped, a sure sign he was upset. But McCoy said nothing. He was too busy with his own worries.

* * * * *

They sat in silence for what seemed like forever. It was impossible for Kirk to measure the time. And he didn't want to bother Spock with a countdown.

The air was noticeably thinner. Kirk's breathing had become labored. He felt Spock's hand on his heaving chest.

"Try not to gasp, Jim. I know it is difficult, but -- " He cut himself off in midsentence. Kirk felt him stiffen.

"What is it?"

"Listen. Do you hear it?" His voice was an intense whisper. Kirk strained to hear something, anything, but to no avail.

"Sorry, Spock. I don't hear a thing."

"Shh."

Still the captain heard nothing. But Spock was sure he did. "Someone is trying to dig through to us."

"The Enterprise? They'd beam us out, unless -- "

"I doubt that it is the Enterprise, Jim. They would not have returned this quickly." Then he sank back against his captain as the realization hit him. "The creature," he said quietly.

"Speculation?" asked Kirk.

"No. I am beginning to feel his emotional broadcast again. He is getting closer. And with some rapidity."

Kirk could hear it now, a faint scraping sound. It grew louder, even as he listened. Something with immense strength was digging through the wall of boulders. He didn't know whether to be pleased or not.

After several long minutes, Spock claimed that he could see some light, or at least a patch that was not as dark as the surrounding area. Some small stones began to scrabble down the unseen face of the wall. Silently, Spock stood up. Kirk's struggle to breathe was making him lightheaded. The Vulcan lifted his friend to his feet and moved him back from the sound, in case the tunneling loosened some of the bigger boulders.

"Spock! I see a light."

Up near the top of the blockage, a hole had appeared and light was visible. The hole grew bigger, until a man could fit through it. The air that flowed in made Kirk's breathing easier.

"Jim, that is lamp light."

Kirk looked at Spock and felt a glow of pleasure at being able to see his friend's face, if only dimly.

"Then the archaeologists, or one of them, must be alive. Or -- "

"Or their 'beast' is intelligent enough to recognize an artificial light and use it."

The digging had ceased. There was silence. No face peered in at them. Whoever or whatever had dug through was letting them make the next move.

"Are you still picking up feelings from our friend outside?"

Spock nodded stiffly. "They are getting stronger. Most unpleasant."

"Well, let's get out of here," said Kirk. "If it wants to kill us, it obviously has the ability to come in after us."

Cautiously, they climbed up the stony slope to the hole. For a moment, they looked at each other, both wanting to go first, in case the creature was dangerous. Kirk grinned. "Forget it. I'm pulling rank. I go first."

Spock nodded solemnly. The creature's emotional outpouring was wearing him down. He let his captain crawl through the hole, following as closely as he could. On the other side, still within what was left of the cave, they saw him.

Kaylin sat crouched like an animal, huddled against one wall, staring back at them with obsidian eyes. He was unclothed. His pigmentation was blue, but not the soft baby blue of the Andorians. Instead, it was a steely grey-blue that gave him the appearance of being made of unburnished metal. And he was massive. His height was hard to estimate from his crouch, but Kirk guessed about two and a half meters. His breadth, however, was immense. He appeared to be built on the square. It amazed the human that the thick legs and arms could even bend. He had folds of heavy skin around his joints. His nose was broad but not flat. His face, like his body, was squared off and his mouth was wide. He was crowned with a mass of wiry black hair. There were no whites to his eyes. They seemed to be all pupil. Kirk noticed that he squinted whenever he had to look toward the light.

Slowly, together, Kirk and Spock moved toward him. He showed no fear. Neither did he show hostility. The only change in his appearance was a bluish fluid that flowed, slower than water, from his eyes.

Spock stopped in his tracks, hands pressed together in front of himself, lips in a tight line.

"Spock?"

The Vulcan shook his head once, hard, as if that would help shut out the raw emotions that bombarded him. "Jim," he gasped. "He's weeping. Waiting for death." He backed away awkwardly, trying to put some kind of distance between himself and the creature. "The hopelessness... loneliness..." He choked back a sob. Kirk went to him.

"Tell me what to do."

Spock had covered his ears, as if that would prevent the sadness from penetrating. He

lifted tortured eyes to his captain. Kirk embraced him, holding him tightly.

It seemed to help. Spock clung to him. The pain in his eyes lessened a bit. "Jim, he... he is feeling hope... But there was none there a moment ago."

Kirk turned to look at the big blue creature. The bottomless black eyes were watching him intently. His attitude seemed different, somehow interested. As they watched, he lifted one hand, reaching out as if to touch them.

Spock backed up against the opposite wall. Outside, darkness still claimed the world. He stared hard at the blackened cave mouth, trying to fight off the painful emotions that screamed at him.

"He wants to touch you," said Kirk.

"No! Not me. Physical contact would..." He swallowed hard. "I could not shut anything out. I would go mad. Jim, this is not just overflow. Not merely lack of training in emotional control. He *broadcasts*. Even this is too close. I cannot touch him." He slumped against the wall.

Kirk felt helpless for a moment. He was no telepath. What could *he* do? Wait a minute. Spock had said this thing was no telepath, either. Well, if its people were built to broadcast feelings, they must be built to receive them.

Slowly, he approached the outstretched hand. He glanced back at his friend, still staring out at the darkness. He hoped this would work. Spock couldn't handle much more of this.

The black eyes never left him. The big hand hesitated a bit. But by that time, Kirk was close enough to make contact. He grasped the large fingers with both hands.

A strange tingling sensation shot up his arms to the elbows. A flash of fear elicited a soothing sound from the creature. He had reached out with the other hand to draw Kirk against him. The human was amazed at the gentleness with which he was treated. The beast was enormously strong, yet capable of such tenderness. Just like Spock.

As the captain's mind filled with warm thoughts of his friend, Kaylin's eyes softened and began to close. Kirk was fascinated. A low rumbling noise began deep within the blue-grey chest, a contented sound.

He didn't notice Spock's approach.

"Well done, Jim."

Kirk looked up at him. "I'm not sure what I did, exactly. Did he stop broadcasting?"

"No, but his emotions are different now. A small measure of satisfaction. The loneliness is much reduced. I can handle the current output."

"Now all we have to do is figure out who he is and how he got here."

"I believe he was deposited here by whoever caused the cave-in. The archaeologists would have been aware of any life native to this planet. Whoever left him here evidently came back for something."

"The abri'in," said Kirk.

"The only logical motive."

"In which case they probably took the shuttlecraft."

"If so, we are stranded here until the Enterprise returns." Spock folded his arms across his chest, not very pleased with the state of affairs. "If that statue falls into the wrong hands, it could possibly be used against Vulcan."

"I understand," said Kirk. "I saw the effect it had on you." He tried unsuccessfully to extricate himself from Kaylin's grasp.

"I would not attempt it yet, Jim. It appears the creature needs physical contact in order to receive your feelings. Your overflow is not nearly as strong as his broadcasting."

Kirk sighed. "I'd give anything for a universal translator."

"Perhaps I can rig something with our communicators and the tricorder."

"We've got nothing but time." He studied the now quiet features of his metallic looking captor. He was beginning to feel uncomfortable, cradled against the massive body. "But try to hurry anyway," he added.

* * * * *

Kordov was in a rage. Systems were going out all over his ship. His sensors would not function. The only reading possible was that of the twinkling stone secured in his hanger deck. Now the transporters were acting up. And his experts told him the stone was the cause of all of it.

Blast! He hoped the Emperor appreciated what he was going through.

"Commander!" His navigator's voice seemed unduly alarmed.

"What is it?"

"Our instruments are not functioning properly, sir. I am not exactly sure where we are."

"What?! Are you trying to tell me you cannot navigate by the stars?"

"Sir, the stars here are very different from those at home... "

Kordov knew that navigating by the stars at warp speeds was impossible. But he was angry, and it was gratifying to have a target for his anger. He paced back and forth on his bridge. Enough of this!

"Kazz! Begin hailing for Romulan vessels. The first one we come across can deliver this prize to their Praetor, and ~~he~~ can inform our Emperor of our generosity."

* * * * *

The sun was well up by the time Spock finished working on his makeshift translator. The captain had finally extricated himself from their rescuer, but it was obvious the creature was not going to let him get far. When Kirk went out to see if the shuttlecraft was indeed gone, he had a very large grey-blue shadow. Returning to the cave, he saw that Spock was making some final adjustments on his creation.

"Will it work?"

The Vulcan lifted one brow, the picture of offended innocence. "Really, Captain. How often do I fail you?"

Kirk grinned. "All right. Turn it on. Let's see what happens."

There was some momentary static, then Spock handed the device to his captain. Kirk turned to face their friend. The sight of the contraption aimed directly at him sent Kaylin stumbling backward, his eyes filled with fear. Aliens had shot hatred and pain at him too many times.

"Don't be afraid," said Kirk.

Stunned, Kaylin stopped. His voice was a deep rumble. "I... I understood you."

The captain smiled and threw Spock a sidelong look that said, 'Not bad.' Then, to Kaylin, he spoke. "I'm Captain James Kirk of the Starship Enterprise. This is Spock, my First Officer.

Who are you? What are you doing here?"

"I am Kaylin. Usually I am Kaylin/Tohbee. But now I am not Complete. Creatures like yourselves brought me here. With furry faces. They pointed hatred at me. And pain."

Kirk's expression this time was one of slight disdain as he shook the homemade translator. "I thought you said this would work."

"It is working, Jim. He obviously has no frame of reference for some of his recent experiences." He turned to the big man. "Kaylin, do you have a ship?"

"Yes."

"What happened to it?"

A wave of sadness washed outward over Spock, and he backed away, instinctively holding up a hand to ward it off. "Stop! Please. Try not to think sad thoughts. Your emotions are overpowering."

"I will try. I worry about Tohbee. He must be looking for me."

"Your friend is on your ship?" asked Kirk.

Kaylin hesitated a moment as the translator fed that to him. Then, unsure, he said, "Yes. Tohbee. My ship." He paused. Then, "You are not like the furry faces."

"He must mean Klingons," said Spock.

"Kaylin, can you reach your ship by radio? With one of our communicators?"

"You have communications devices?"

"Yes. Spock, where's that other communicator?"

Spock handed it to him. "If his ship is not close, it won't do much good, Jim. You know what limited range these have."

"Well, it's worth a try." He looked at Kaylin, at the big hands, and said, "Why don't you tell us what frequency? We'll work the controls."

"Is all your equipment this small?" Kaylin was staring at the fragile communicator as one would examine a minutely designed toy.

"It's just scaled down for smaller hands."

It took them a few minutes to work out the frequency equivalents. Kaylin grasped the differences in their technologies very quickly. At last, he took the tiny transmitter and spoke into it.

"Tohbee. Tohbee, this is Kaylin. Tohbee, please hear me."

There was silence. Again he tried. And again. Kirk took the communicator and made a few adjustments.

"Try it again. I varied the band a little."

With a very human sigh, Kaylin called out again. "Tohbee. This is Kaylin. Please hear me."

Static snapped and crackled. Then a relieved voice responded. "Kaylin! I am approaching the planet. I will be there almost immediately. Are you well?"

"I was lonely," he said. "But I have found friends for us."

"No, Kaylin. No more aliens. We are going home. I will activate the transport unit."

"I cannot leave these two down here alone," said Kaylin. "They are not like the aliens who

attacked us. They... they are Complete. As we are. But they are very fragile. It is hard for them to join. I saw them try. They touched, but touching was not enough. The furry faced ones took something away. It belongs to these new friends. We will help them retrieve it."

The voice on the other end sounded resigned. "Very well, Kaylin. As you wish. But I cannot wait any longer. I must activate the transport unit now. I am so empty!"

"All right." He faced Kirk and Spock. "I will go first. Then I will have Tohbee transport you aboard. Please wait here." He moved away a few feet. "Tohbee, activate."

His form shimmered out of sight somewhat more slowly than if the Enterprise had locked onto him.

"Tohbee doesn't sound delighted at the idea of having us aboard," said Kirk.

"Indeed," Spock murmured.

They felt the machine take hold. Inside his head, Kirk thought he could hear somebody's warp drive activate. It felt like hours before a dimly lit room took shape around him. His body felt sore all over. His second sensation was a chill. The temperature was ten degrees lower than that aboard the Enterprise.

Spock was leaning against a bulkhead for support. His beam-up had been equally as rough. The system was evidently built for physiques like Kaylin's.

"Are you all right?"

"Yes, Captain. Somewhat nauseous. But whole."

"I don't see Kaylin."

"He cannot be far. I feel an overwhelming flow of... affection. In that direction." They moved together down a wide corridor. The ship was not as small as the Federation's one and two-man scout vessels, but was probably intended for the same purpose. After all, the one or two men would take up a considerably larger area.

There were no doors on the ship. They moved through an archway and came upon the bridge area. Kaylin was seated in the only chair, built to accommodate his frame. He did not notice them. On either side of him were grips of pulsating material. His hands were holding them tightly, his head tilted back, his eyes closed. The dim lighting fluctuated with his breathing. Kaylin was silent except for the occasionally whispered name, "Tohbee..."

Spock leaned against his captain, his face pale. "They are broadcasting," he gasped, straining for control.

Kirk supported him, one arm around his waist. "Shall I make them stop? I don't even see Tohbee." He looked around anxiously, wondering how he was going to make the huge Kaylin do anything, but ready to try for Spock's sake.

"No, Jim. It is overpowering, but not devastating. They are not broadcasting loneliness and sadness." He looked deep into his captain's eyes, his own lit with the warmth of Kaylin's emotion. "It is love they are screaming at each other." He let his head drop to Kirk's shoulder, his breathing labored.

"But Spock, where the hell is Tohbee?"

Spock looked up into his eyes again. He seemed surprised that Kirk didn't know. "Jim, Tohbee is the ship."

It was a full five minutes before Kaylin released the grips that made emotional communication with Tohbee possible. The intensity of their exchange had lessened, and Spock was able to shut out most of what was left. As if there had been no pause since beaming up from the planet, Kaylin addressed Kirk.

"Tohbee has calculated a course for us. It makes sense that the furry faces would go back the way they came. We will return to the point where we were attacked and see what we

find on the way." He ran his hands over the grips. They pulsed with a greyish-yellow light. He seemed concerned, but did not speak again for several minutes.

Spock was examining the bridge. "Fascinating, Captain. Truly a one man vessel. Everything is tied into a central control computer. But there doesn't appear to be any computer station. No manual override."

Kaylin interrupted. He had arisen from his chair and moved up behind them with surprising quietness. "I do not need an override, for I do not handle the computers. That is Tohbee's department. Those circuits are directly connected to him."

"But computer circuitry can go haywire," said Kirk. "Surely you have some recourse if a system needs adjusting."

"When *my* system needs adjusting, I see a physician. So it is with Tohbee. There is an entire branch of medicine on my planet which deals with Manship construction." He stopped, looking at his two petite friends. "You seem puzzled. Don't you understand? Tohbee was once all flesh, as I am. We have been together since childhood. We are Complete. When the accident crushed his limbs, left him more dead than alive, he became a Manship, and to be with him, I trained as a pilot. Our entire space fleet is comprised of such ships. Some are larger, for hauling freight. But all require Completion to live, just as other people do. And there is some recompense for the loss of their bodies. For Tohbee will continue to live after I and my grandchildren are gone. As long as he is kept in good repair." His voice saddened as he added, "And barring attacks by hostile aliens."

"You seem upset," said Kirk. "Is something wrong with Tohbee?"

"Nothing I can fix. As soon as we return home, I will have it looked to. The furry faces blasted him with some kind of weapon. The damaged area does not affect his maneuverability." He moved back to his chair while he spoke. Reaching out to caress one of the grips, he added, more to Tohbee than Kirk or Spock, "It will be all right."

* * * * *

Kordov's ship was on full alert. Systems were out all over and the helm was not answering. The commander was furious.

"Kazz! I thought you said a Romulan vessel was on its way?"

"It is, Commander. But arrival is not expected for several hours, sir."

"Blast! What kind of stone is this that disables a starship? Place more shielding about the thing."

"Sir, we are using all that we have aboard. And there are those among the crew who feel it is not the stone that is causing the trouble, Commander."

"Oh? If not the stone, then what?"

Kazz appeared fearful, as if he knew the suggestion would anger his superior. "The statue represents an alien god, Commander -- "

Kordov exploded. "Enough of this superstitious nonsense! Find more shielding to put around that thing, if you have to tear apart the crew's quarters to do it. And tell that Romulan ship to hurry!"

* * * * *

Tohbee was fast for his size. Kaylin's people had the capacity for interstellar travel, but had never explored much beyond their own system. Spock spent hours examining the Manship's computers while Kirk and Kaylin compared technologies. Several times they tried to raise the Enterprise with no luck. Tohbee's radio was not of sub-space design.

Kirk was sure that Scotty could track their attackers by their propulsion residue. But Tohbee had to depend on computer extrapolation for his course. There was a good chance that they wouldn't find the Klingon at all. And if they did, what could they do without a starship, other than ask them to return the statue?

Yawning and stretching, Kirk tried to shake off some of the fatigue and worry. Spock was watching him carefully.

"Captain, you need rest. Even Kaylin is sleeping."

"And you, of course, do not need to rest?"

"Of course not. My Vulcan physiology -- "

The captain's knowing smile cut him off. "I've heard that one before," he chided. Unconsciously, he imitated Spock's stance of hands folded behind his back. They stood only inches apart. The dim lighting and muted thrum of Tohbee's engines lent a softness to their surroundings. When they spoke, their voices were subdued.

"I wish I had the confidence in this Manship that Kaylin has."

Spock nodded his understanding. "Yes. I wonder if we are wise to pursue a Klingon battleship in a vessel this size. There is no offensive weaponry -- "

"True. Only defensive... Spock, do you think Tohbee could have been responsible for the attack on that passenger vessel?"

"It seems likely. The Klingons would not want to attract that kind of attention. And a truly hostile vessel would have destroyed the ship, not merely disabled it."

"Agreed," said Kirk. He sighed. "I'd sure feel better if we could contact the Enterprise." He let his eyes wander over the alien bridge, settling finally on the gargantuan command chair and its curious lack of instruments. Nothing but two greyish-yellow hand grips jutting up from the arms of the chair. Funny, thought Kirk. Earlier they had seemed to glow. But no inner light shone from them now.

"Perhaps," suggested Spock, "we could convince Kaylin to turn back and rendezvous with our ship."

"I already tried. He insists we continue. Klingons or no, this heading will take him closer to home. He's worried about Tohbee. Wants to get some medical attention... or an overhaul... or something." Another yawn crept up on him. "Well, we still have a while before we can hope to catch up to the Klingons. Maybe we'd better get some sleep." He glanced around again. "He does seem to be flying himself. And Kaylin insists an alarm will sound if anything happens."

They moved down the wide corridor to a makeshift sleeping alcove that Kaylin had prepared for them. The low temperature on the ship made the warm cushions and blankets a welcome sight. Kirk made sure Spock was covered, then settled in himself, close enough to feel the warmth and inhale the tangy odor of his friend's body. The nearness of Spock let him shut out the alienness of his surroundings, and with a quiet sigh, he drifted off to sleep.

* * * * *

An agonized scream jolted Kirk awake. Even before his eyes were wide open, one hand reached automatically for Spock. The Vulcan was already up. He took Kirk's outstretched hand and lifted the human to his feet. Together they bolted down the corridor to Tohbee's bridge.

Kaylin's steel blue bulk sagged in its command chair. His fists held fast to the yellow-grey grips, his eyes stared blankly ahead.

Spock stopped suddenly, as if he had hit a force field. Kirk knew that Kaylin was broadcasting again. The shock of the alien emotions had drained the Vulcan's face of all color. His eyes were squeezed shut against the pain. One word escaped: "Sadness!"

"Kaylin! You've got to control your feelings! You're hurting Spock!" Kirk grabbed the massive shoulders and tried to shake some understanding into the alien. "Listen to me!"

The deep voice rumbled back at him. "It's no use. Tohbee is dying. Tohbee... my friend."

"He's not dead yet, is he? We'll help him! You've got to believe me. But you have to control your sadness. Spock can't survive the intensity of your feelings."

"I will try," said Kaylin. He made an obvious effort at self control.

Spock began to breathe easier and Kirk relaxed a bit, releasing his hold on the blue-grey flesh.

"Are you sure there is a chance to save Tohbee?"

"I have it on good authority," said Kirk, his eyes still on Spock, "that where there is life, there is hope."

Spock took several deep breaths, then straightened his uniform. Except for a lingering paleness, he appeared completely normal. His voice, however, betrayed him with a slight tremor.

"Kaylin, what is wrong with Tohbee?"

"I cannot reach him."

"You cannot communicate?"

"Oh, he hears our words. He scans our presence. He feels our weight against the deck. But the grips are not functioning. We cannot share our feelings. Without Completion, life is impossible."

"I see," said Kirk. "These grips enable you to communicate your emotions to one another. They act as conductors."

"Yes. It is the only way for a Manship to be Complete. Physical contact is necessary to life. Without a flesh and blood body, the grips are the only way. These no longer function." He ran hands over the useless projections. "Without Completion, we will never make it home."

Kirk turned to his First Officer. "Well, what do you think? Can we do anything?"

"I examined much of the computer system earlier. It is most comprehensible, and apparently functioning well. Certain energy conduits appeared to be damaged. I assumed it was a result of the Klingon attack. Tohbee's hull withstood a phaser blast that would have destroyed an unshielded starship. However, damage was done on a less apparent level. The burnt out conduits must have supplied energies to the grips necessary to their function. The fact that Tohbee was not aware of the problem is an indication of the debilitating effect that lack of contact has on his people."

"You still haven't answered my question," Kirk said in a low voice. "Can we do anything to help?"

"Not unless we can replace the grips."

"With what?"

"Unknown, Captain. However, with Kaylin's permission, I shall try to learn more about them."

* * * * *

The tension on the Enterprise bridge did not lessen with the change of watch. Scotty hadn't set foot in his engine room since they discovered the destruction on N-37. The captain's body hadn't been found. There were signs of some sort of rescue. If Spock and the captain had been trapped in the cave-in, and the archaeologists were all dead, who dug them out? The only other

possibility was the beast mentioned by the scientists. And Scotty didn't like that a bit.

Scans had revealed the propulsion residue of a Klingon vessel, and traces of the abri'in they had stolen. And something else...

Scott peered into the viewer, studying the reading Lieutenant Brody had come up with. "Aye, it could be residue from another vessel. One thing's for sure. If this is all from the Klingon ship, that machine's got engine troubles in the worst way. So --- " He straightened up. "Perhaps the Captain and Mr. Spock hitched a ride. We'll find out." He stepped down to the command console. "Lieutenant Uhura, see that the search parties are outfitted with survival equipment. They might as well keep looking. We may be going after a shadow. But we're going, nevertheless."

McCoy had come on the bridge unnoticed. "Do you really think we'll find them out there?" He stared at the viewscreen full of stars.

"Maybe not, Doctor. But if nothing else, we'll catch the Klingons that attacked them."

* * * * *

Tohbee continued on course, driven more by a longing to be home than any desire to retrieve stolen merchandise. The knowledge that Kaylin was safe inside him was reassuring. But there was also the knowledge that his grips were useless. As close as they were, he was cut off from his friend. His engines thrummed with heated purpose. He had to get them home before the Empty Death claimed them both. Let the fragile aliens tinker with his machinery. He knew there was nothing they could do.

The hours were dragging by for Kirk. His attempts to assist Spock with his investigation of Tohbee's inner workings were met with uncharacteristic short temper. The constant strain of Kaylin's emotional broadcasting was wearing the Vulcan down. Kirk finally ordered him to stop for a while when Kaylin prepared some food.

"I already asked," Kirk assured him. "It's a vegetable protein. And it's warm. It'll help cut the chill a bit."

Spock nodded wearily and accepted the food. "Where is Kaylin?"

"He said he would eat in his sleeping area. He wanted to talk to Tohbee. And he wasn't sure he could control his sadness much longer."

With a touch of dry humor, Spock murmured, "Control? I hadn't noticed any."

Kirk tried to smile reassuringly at him. "Try to hold on. With any luck, the Enterprise will be on our trail. Enough time has passed. They must have returned to N-37 by now, and found -- "

"Luck," Spock interrupted. "You depend on that random factor a great deal."

Kirk's features darkened with concern. Non-sequitor remarks were totally out of line for Spock. He tried to keep the alarm out of his voice as he asked, "How is the search for knowledge coming?" He indicated the dismantled command console with a nod of his head.

"Slowly. Concentration is becoming more difficult." There was a long pause, then, "Abri'in is very beautiful."

"Yes, it is."

"And soothing."

"I noticed."

Spock tilted his head to one side, letting curiosity dominate every feature. "It is an unexpected characteristic. I have seen abri'in before, of course. But only in small pieces. As jewelry. It has no noticeable effect on the nervous system. And yet this statue -- "

"This statue could put you to sleep in a matter of minutes," Kirk commented.

"Indeed. Perhaps the legends about this piece of sculpture had their basis in fact."

"What legends?"

"An image of the fire god, capable of instilling the peace of Vulcan in all who worshipped it. I had assumed it was merely legend, a myth. Finding this statue was most surprising."

Kirk finished his meal. "I thought the peace of Vulcan was a mental state, brought about by meditation -- inner calm, that sort of thing."

Spock nodded thoughtfully. "Yes. Essentially, that is true."

"But at one time, it was artificially induced... by this statue?"

Spock let Kirk take the empty bowl out of his hands. "Do you suppose that returning the statue would have a detrimental effect on Vulcan philosophy?"

"You're the Vulcan," Kirk smiled. "You tell me."

Spock sighed heavily, his shoulders sagging. "I'm afraid that I can't tell anyone anything at this point." He rubbed his fists against his temples. "If only he would leave me alone for a little while -- !"

"Easy," said Kirk. He reached out and took Spock's hands in his own. "You're freezing," he murmured. "Come here. I'll warm you." He pulled his friend close, wrapping strong arms around him, rocking him slightly. "It's all right. The Enterprise can't be far away. She's a fast ship. It shouldn't take too long."

"You feel good," Spock interrupted. "It was the same when we touched the abri'in, as if you were holding me -- " He cut himself off, bewildered by his lack of control. He tried to pull away from his captain. "Forgive me. I am not myself."

Kirk released him reluctantly. "No problem," he said softly. Then the realization of what Spock had said hit him. "Spock! The abri'in let you feel my emotion? The same as touching me does?"

Spock nodded, not comprehending at first. Then his eyes blazed with awareness. "The grips! But they are not abri'in."

"Still, if they share the same properties, they might -- "

" -- do the same job," Spock finished. They got up together.

"I'll tell Kaylin," said Kirk. "Maybe it will alleviate some of his depression."

"And mine," Spock murmured at his departing back.

* * * * *

Kordov did not understand the Romulan's attitude.

"Kazz! What do you mean, they don't want it? They have to want it! How else is it going to get to their precious Praetor?"

"The Romulan sub-commander says they know all about it, sir. The thing wasn't lost in ancient times. It was buried. It disrupted the equipment on the vessel that carried it, and had other detrimental effects on the crew."

"I'm not interested in the problems of some long-dead spaceship crew! I have problems of my own! Tell the Romulans that if they refuse to take the thing, I'll... I'll beam it into space!"

In seconds, Kazz turned a bleak face to relay the reply. "Sir, the Romulan sub-commander congratulates you on having a transporter that still functions, and says to do what you like with the statue."

A smouldering Kordov watched the Romulan ship depart. Yes, he would love to beam the thing into space, but his transporters were not operable. Luckily for the Romulans, neither were his phasers.

* * * * *

Renewed hope that the abri'in would help Tohbee was not enough. There was still the problem of how to get it.

Kirk paced back and forth on Tohbee's bridge, frustrated by their inactivity. He wished fervently for the Enterprise to arrive. The close proximity to Kaylin was taking a large toll on Spock, and Kirk wanted to put distance between the Vulcan and the alien as soon as possible.

"Captain Kirk... "

He jumped. The rumble of sound came from behind him but the translated meaning emanated from Spock's makeshift device at his side. Irritated at himself for being startled, he answered. "Yes, Kaylin?"

"Tohbee is activating his viewer." His bottomless eyes stared mournfully at the small screen. "There." He lifted a massive finger accusingly. "The ones who attacked us!"

A Klingon battlecruiser was visible, growing slowly larger on the screen as Tohbee flew nearer.

"Spock, do you see that?" Kirk was puzzled.

Spock's voice was thick with fatigue. "Yes, Captain. They are not moving. They appear to be dead in space."

"They're still in Federation territory," said Kirk. "Considering their headstart, they didn't get very far."

"Indeed." Spock was busying himself with Tohbee's instruments. "I read the abri'in aboard their vessel, Captain. Quite strongly."

"Are we close enough to hail them with this radio?"

"Yes, I believe so. It may take them a few moments to tie in... assuming they wish to do so."

At last, an imperious Klingon visage shimmered on the viewscreen. He showed only momentary surprise at seeing his former captive with two Starfleet officers.

"I am Kordov, Commander of this vessel. Who are you? What do you want?"

Kirk tried to look as authoritative as he could, standing on the bridge of a tiny one-man vessel.

"I'm Captain Kirk of the Starship Enterprise. I want the statue you stole from planet N-37. And I want *you*, for the murder of the four archaeologists stationed there."

Kordov laughed out loud. "You make a big noise, Kirk. I, of course, refuse to surrender. How do you intend to enforce your demands?"

"With violence, if necessary."

Kordov laughed again, even more uproariously. "Come, come, Captain. You can do better than that."

"I'm not bluffing." He didn't see it, but he could almost feel one Vulcan eyebrow shooting up.

"You're a fool, Kirk. I ought to blast you out of space right now."

"You tried destroying this ship once before and failed, remember? The hull is impervious to

phaser fire. You took the occupant prisoner. His race is allied with the Federation." ... or would be soon, he added to himself. "The only reason he didn't destroy your vessel from the inside out was because of the deep respect his people have for all forms of life, no matter how low on the evolutionary scale."

Kordov was no longer laughing. After all, it was true they had tried and failed to destroy the little ship. "What does all that have to do with the present?"

"Simply this. Either you surrender peacefully... or I use this little war machine to destroy your ship."

Kaylin could not believe his ears. He was close enough to Kirk to hear the translator's broadcast, but surely there was some mistake. And there was a word that didn't translate at all... *war*. He wondered what it meant.

Kordov did not believe Kirk entirely. There was some truth to what he was saying, but the Klingon simply could not bring himself to trust an Earther. On the other hand, his ship was without phasers, without shields, without engine power. And if Kirk was even half right about the alien ship, his battle cruiser wouldn't stand a chance.

"I'm waiting for your decision," Kirk demanded.

Kordov's face was sour. "Very well, Kirk. We surrender. But you will have to tow us. Our engines are out."

"No problem," Kirk lied. "But before we begin, I want you to launch the shuttlecraft you stole with the statue inside it. We'll carry it aboard our vessel."

Kordov's eyes twinkled with delight. He tried to conceal the eagerness he felt. "Hmph. Very well, Kirk. You seem to have the upper hand." ... For the moment, he added silently.

As the screen went dark, Kirk turned to Kaylin. "Two questions. One, can you dock with that shuttlecraft long enough to bring the abri'in aboard?"

"Yes. Our ships have to be flexible, Captain. We can do it."

"Good. And, two. Is Tohbee rigged with tractor beams?"

"Yes. But we have nothing as large as that ship out there. Tohbee might not be able to tow it."

"We'll worry about that later. Right now, we want that abri'in so Spock can work on those grips."

* * * * *

Kordov saw to the launching of the shuttlecraft personally. He couldn't wait to get the statue off his ship. "Kazz. Start working on our equipment. I want this ship back to normal fast. If Kirk thinks we're going to let ourselves be towed to a Federation port, he's out of his mind."

* * * * *

"Well, Spock, how does it look?"

The Vulcan was too exhausted to suppress the long sigh. He rubbed his forehead with one hand. Kaylin was staying as far away as he could, but his need for Tohbee was growing, and with it, the strength of his emotional broadcasting.

"Captain, I need Mr. Scott. This is a difficult problem even for one operating at peak efficiency." His eyes rested on the abri'in beside him.

"I hope your people aren't too upset about not getting their statue back," said Kirk, following his gaze.

"It may not be necessary to damage the actual figure. The base is substantial. With Mr. Scott's help, it should be possible to save both Tohbee and the statue. Without his help..."

Kirk nodded his understanding. He glanced across the bridge, where Kaylin was slouched against the bulkhead. "How long do you think Tohbee can go on towing that Klingon ship?"

"Not much longer. It is a heavy drain. Indeed, I am surprised he is capable of even beginning such a task. A remarkable ship."

Kirk smiled. "Remember, he's not just a ship. Maybe it's his personal desire for survival that's giving him strength." He let his hand linger on the statue. "Have you noticed anything odd since the abri'in came aboard, Spock? With the instruments, I mean?"

"No, Captain. Why?"

"That's just it. Neither have I. Scotty told me this stuff wreaks havoc with transporters and sensors. I'd lay odds it was responsible for disabling the Klingon ship. And yet, Tohbee is unaffected."

"Understandable," said Spock. "We ascertained that the grips were made of a substance with similar attributes. The instrumentation aboard this vessel was constructed to deal with such disruptive qualities." He grew pensive for a moment. "Jim, if the abri'in is responsible for the Klingon's troubles, we must assume that given the absence of the stone, those troubles will cease to exist."

"Yes. And it's not likely that they will announce to us when that happens. We'll just have to do what we can, when we can. Let me know if I can help you with this."

Spock nodded sluggishly. He lifted one hand to remove an instrument panel. It was trembling violently.

"Spock!" Kirk's features reflected his concern. He grasped the hand, squeezing it tightly. "You can't work like this."

"I am trying to control the effects of the broadcasting," Spock said weakly, "but it is getting more difficult."

Before Kirk could respond, Tohbee began to vibrate. An ugly screeching sound emanated from somewhere beneath them. Kaylin staggered toward them, his voice edged with fear. "They're killing him! They're killing Tohbee!"

Kaylin's approach sent Spock reeling. The tiny bit of control he had left was gone. He screamed at Kaylin. "You must get away from me! No! Please... get away!"

In the split second that it took for Kirk to reach Spock, he realized what was happening. The Klingons had repaired their engines and were pulling away. Tohbee was hanging onto them with something other than mechanical ability, because he wasn't built for this kind of stress.

"Kaylin! Tell Tohbee to let them go! We've got the abri'in. He'll tear himself apart if he hangs onto them!"

A moment later, the vibration stopped. On the viewscreen they could see the Klingon ship pulling away fast. The only sound on the little bridge was Spock's ragged breathing. The Vulcan was hunched against one wall, his hands covering his face. As the human watched, a violent tremor tore through him. Kirk pulled him against his chest. "Easy," he murmured. "It's all right. I'm right here."

But it wasn't all right, and the captain knew it. The intelligent eyes were dull with pain, the impassive features reflected the emotional turmoil that Kaylin was broadcasting. Not wanting to add to the negative emotions Spock was feeling, Kirk shoved aside the fear he felt for his friend and forced himself to feel the confidence and self-assurance that had inspired his trust. It wasn't easy. Seeing Spock like this hurt.

Kaylin had moved away again. His voice was filled with confusion. "Kirk, tell me what to do. I do not want to hurt your friend. But how can I control something of which I am unaware?"

"He understands, Kaylin. It's not your fault. If only the Enterprise would get here."

"That is what you call your ship?"

"Yes," he answered absently, smoothing the dark head pressed against his chest. "Our ship."

"What does he look like?"

Preoccupied, Kirk almost didn't hear the question. "Oh. She's... a big silver bird... graceful... elegant..."

"Like that?"

Kirk spun his head around. Kaylin was pointing at the viewscreen. And there, on a backdrop of stars, was the prettiest thing he had seen in days. "Spock! The Enterprise! She found us."

* * * * *

Two forms sparkled into existence on the transporter pads. No sooner had he materialized than Spock uttered a long, loud sigh of relief. Kirk reached for him, afraid he might topple. But he was already gathering up his shattered control, taking charge of himself. Kaylin's absence was all he needed in order to recover.

"Feeling better?" Kirk smiled.

Spock nodded. "No lasting effects, Captain." He rubbed his temples gingerly.

"None?"

"A headache."

"Bones will fix that."

McCoy had just come through the door. Scott stepped forward from behind the transporter console and greeted them. "It's good to see you Captain, Mr. Spock. We were afraid you'd been done away with by that creature on N-37."

"It was no creature, Scotty. His name is Kaylin. He saved our lives. Now we have the chance to return that favor. You'll need Bones' help. There's some pretty delicate work involved. Spock will assist you from his station on the bridge. Kaylin's emotional output is... uncomfortable for him."

"Very well, sir. Our sensors tell us you retrieved the abri'in. Do you mind if I ask how? And who took it?"

"Klingons, Scotty. They're probably clear across the neutral zone by now. I'll tell you all about it later. But right now, Kaylin has a friend he wants you to meet. You, too, Bones. I think you gentlemen are in for a surprise." Part of him longed to see Scotty's reaction when he learned that Kaylin's ship was a living entity. But even more than that, he wanted to get back to his bridge.

In the turbolift, he watched Spock carefully for signs of his ordeal. "Are you sure you're ready to work? McCoy and Scotty could probably get along without you for an hour or so."

"I am quite well, Captain. Thank you." His voice was back to duty status, even, without inflection. But Kirk had no trouble reading the gratitude in his eyes.

The captain smiled softly at him. "Talk about your Don Quixote's," he said. "That Kaylin is some adventurer. Taking off on his own with his trusty sidekick to prove to his people that some of us out here are worth knowing." He shook his head. "Hmph. Wonder what makes a man do

something like that?"

Spock's dark eyes warmed a bit, and the corners of his mouth turned up ever so slightly. Gazing fondly at his captain's profile, he murmured, "Indeed."

* * * * *

Kaylin leaned back in his huge chair, fondling the new grips that linked him to his ship. Tohbee's engines thrummed with renewed spirit. Between the physician and the engineer, the humans had performed small miracles with the Manship's equipment.

Kaylin smiled. The trip home would be a pleasant one. Once there, he would tell his people about the Federation. He would tell about Kirk and Spock, fragile aliens from across the void who nevertheless knew Completion.

He sighed heavily, letting his satisfaction flow through the abri'in to his Manship. It would take time for the news to spread and be accepted. The High Officials might even be angry at first. But there were many who hungered for this day. Thousands, like himself, longed to know other ways, see other places and peoples.

It would take time. But someday he would return.



"KAYLIN"

I

Sometimes
Amid the wonder
Of ringed red planets
And stars spilled like
Diamonds on black velvet
I miss the rain.

II

Gentle spring rain
That leaves in it's wake
The soft green smell
Of growing things.



III

Of winter storms
With clapping thunder
And blue-green jagged fingers
Of lightening striking earth.

IV

Sometimes when rushing at
warp speeds across midnight skies,
I miss the plodding gait
Of a horse 'cross country roads.

V

A quiet stroll
Among rainbow flowers
On a carpet of green
And trees standing
Tall and proud.

Sometimes I miss
Home.



VI

But in my reverie
Come thoughts of you
And I realize,
Where you are,
Is home.

HOME

Jimmye Galli

I

On rare occasions
When thoughts should
Be filled with
Formulas and computations

II

Come images of silver birds
Against ruby skies and ebon hills,
And moss green plants
Blossomed in red and yellow
Upon the ochre sands.

III

Of monsoon rains that
Gush down deep ravines,
To dry on touch
To the hot earth of my home.

IV

Of quiet meditation
In ordered gardens
Where logical thought
Is bred.

V

On rare occasions,
These portraits of Vulcan
Intrude on
Duties and obligations,

VI

But then my eyes
Are drawn to yours
And where you are,
Is home.

HOME

Jimnye Galli



Ode To A

Newborn Son

Child who never was,
Lying there so peacefully
Asleep
With your infant dreams.
Tiny bottom arched high
Pointing at the ceiling sky
Of stars and suns and moons.

Infant of science and skill,
Hungry mouth searching for
Comfort
I cannot give you.
Fist pressed against the pouting
Rosebud lips, seeking solace from
Your own meager resources.

Babe, my only son,
With silken fans of ebony lashes brushing wet
Cheeks
Of milky celadon.
Child of diversity and rigid tradition
Who must be carefully nurtured in your father's customs.

Child who never was,
Lying here so peacefully
Asleep
In your Human mother's arms,
Lulled and sated by the repetitious body
Movements... back and forth, back and forth...

Infant of science and skill,
Hunger satisfied, doxing in the curve of my bosom,
Consoled.
Ancient words echoing in your tiny elfin ears,
"Hush little baby, don't say a word,
Mama's gonna buy you a mockingbird..."

Babe, only son of Sarek's loins,
Basking in the warm passion of your dual
Heritage.
Tomorrow you must be your father's son,
And smiles and tears and gentle baby hugs
Must be set aside forever.



A slap
And you
Its om
Newbor

James
What a
Vocal!
A tiny
Rigid,
Livid,
Crimso

Alone
The cr
Precio
As I m
Finger
Append
The se
Alread
Ordeal
I hug
Your n
A perf
The st
At the
Eagerl
Rightf
Contem
This b

Warm c
Gurgli
Happy
Brave
You sn
And me

(Move! Breathe! CRY!)

A slap! A gasp! A sudden, husky wail,
And your outraged cry fills the room of pain,
Its ominous stillness broken by the sound of
Newborn anger.

James Tiberius Kirk
What a name for one so small and red and
Vocal!
A tiny powerhouse of unbound fury,
Rigid,
Livid,
Crimson in your fierce, unbridled protest.
(Welcome to the world, my son!)

Alone together... much later...
The crisp winter evening brings us private moments,
Precious time of awe and wonder
As I marvel at your minute perfection,
Fingers (*ten*)... toes (*ten!*)... counting each miniature
Appendage; kissing the soft down on your head; noting
The severed birth wound -- a symbol of our union --
Already shriveling into the lifelong scar of your
Ordeal.
I hug you closer,
Your naked body melded into mine,
A perfect fit,
The still-quivering lips locked and fiercely tugging
At the ripeness of my breast. Little egotist.
Eagerly grasping, holding, claiming that which is
Rightfully yours; blind, blue eyes staring,
Contemplating
This brand new source of pleasure.

Warm chameleon,
Gurgling in my arms
Happy with your fullness and this
Brave new world you've found.
You smile at me -- a toothless, milky grin --
And melt my heart.

*lds apart,
lding... loving their*

*intertwined,
hanging... growing into*

*rothers,
ouching... loving*

d each other.

By Theresa Wright

AND NOW SILENCE

By Teri White

*And now there is merely silence,
Silence, silence saying
All we did not know.*

-- Benet --

At last: The door opens and the sun bursts in.

//My golden sun. At last. Now I am warm again.//

Hi... how're you feeling? You look fine...

Sorry I didn't get here when I promised, but you know Starfleet... at the last minute they diverted us to Argus II, on one of their damned diplomatic courier pick-ups. You know how I hate that kind of thing... using my ship as a taxi. We have to deliver him to Starbase IV, so I can't stay long this time.

Hey, look here, I brought our chess set... thought maybe we could have a game, if you'd like... thought maybe you'd like to... well, I'll just set it up right over here and maybe later...

Everybody on the ship asked me to say hello to you... especially Bones.

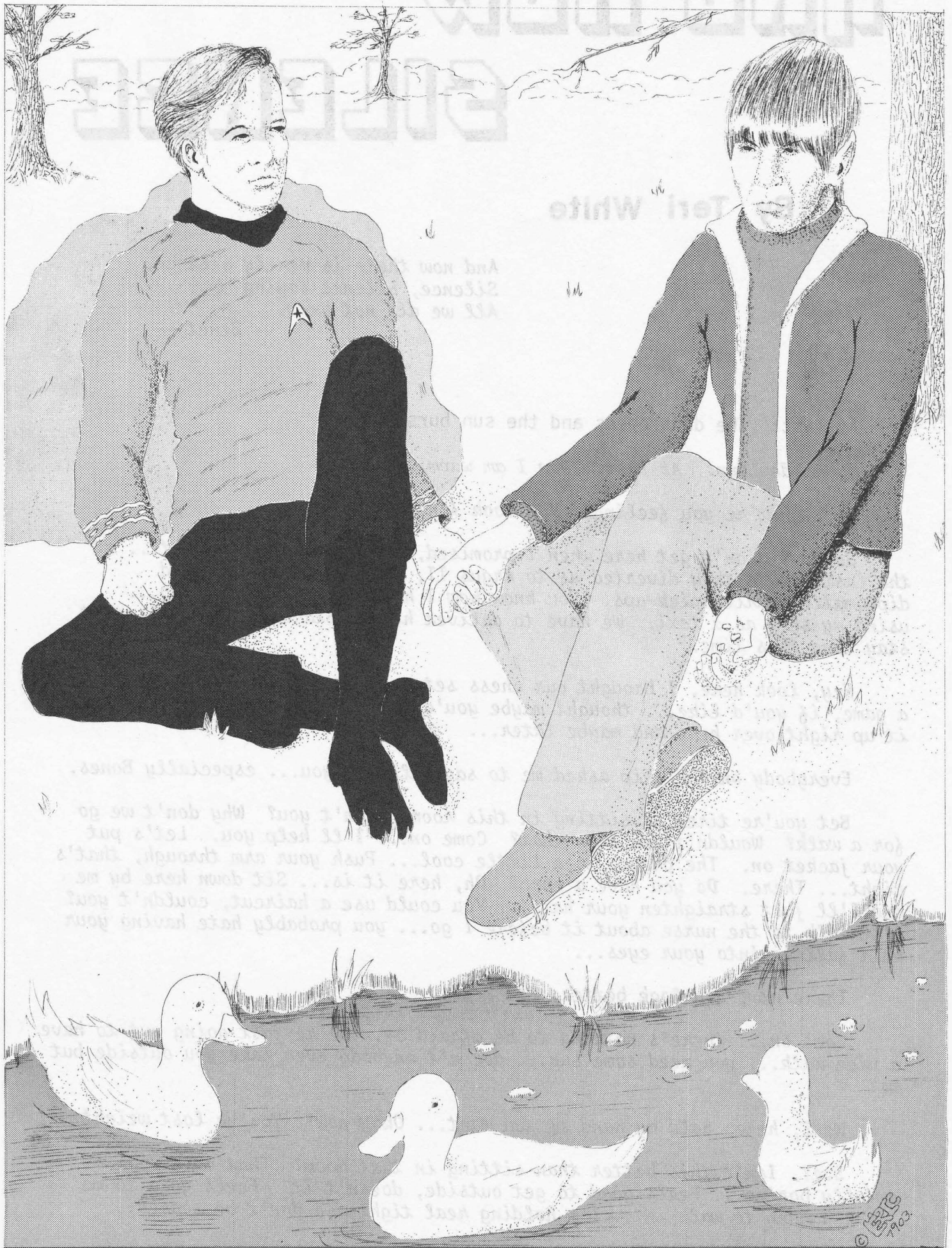
Bet you're tired of sitting in this room, aren't you? Why don't we go for a walk? Wouldn't you like that? Come on... I'll help you. Let's put your jacket on. The breeze is a little cool... Push your arm through, that's right... There. Do you have a comb? Oh, here it is... Sit down here by me and I'll just straighten your hair... You could use a haircut, couldn't you? I'll talk to the nurse about it before I go... you probably hate having your hair falling into your eyes...

There now, you look better, let's go...

Come on... there's nothing to be afraid of. We're just going out to have a nice walk... you need some sun... doesn't anybody ever take you outside but me?

Well, here, hold my hand if you want... Okay now? You've lost weight...

See? Isn't this better than sitting in that room? That must get awfully boring... Feels good to get outside, doesn't it? Feels good to me ... a garden to walk in... I'm holding real tight, so don't be scared...



Which way shall we go? Down to the lake? I remember the ducks we saw last time. Let's go to the lake again, okay....

Never mind those people... they won't hurt you... they only came to watch the ducks like we did... besides, I'm here. Why don't we sit down right here on the grass... see the ducks? I think they've all grown since the last time I was here... three months ago... so long...

...oh goddamnit...

Oh, please, don't be frightened... I'm sorry... I didn't mean to scare you... I just got something in my eye, some dirt or something... it's gone now... I'm okay... really.

... I miss you... that's all...

Do they take good care of you here? Bones says they do, but... They should take you outside more often... and cut your hair... it's falling in your eyes again... here, let me push it back. Bones says this is the best place in the galaxy for you...

The best place in the galaxy for you to be is on the Enterprise.

Those ducks sure like the bread crumbs, don't they? Would you like to feed them? Here... just scatter the crumbs on the water... that's the way...

It just isn't the same now, you know? I'm thinking about quitting. Resigning my commission. Bones is mad, of course, that I would even consider such a thing... he doesn't understand... I don't understand. It just isn't fun anymore.

Come on, let's walk again.

I wish you'd say something to me.. anything... just a word... say something!

I'm sorry. No, I'm not mad... I didn't mean to yell like that... Stop shaking, please... I'm sorry...

Are you getting tired? Well, maybe we should go back to your room...

Bones says it's only a guilt complex... that I feel I should have been the one... maybe it's partly that, but... mostly it's just that I miss you... I keep thinking it'll get better, you know? But it doesn't. I keep turning around, expecting to see you walking beside me, and it's always some stranger there...

I think the worst part is that the whole thing was so useless.. so unnecessary. If I had only sent someone else down to Zephon. Anyone else. But how could I have known that the natives would attack... that their poisonous darts could cause brain damage to Vulcans... How could I have known?

... suddenly the whole galaxy is filled with strangers...

Here we are... We could play some chess now, if you'd like... remember how we used to play? That's right, pick up one piece... oh, hey, it's all

right... see? They don't break... Why don't I leave the set here and maybe you can practice, so when I come next time, we can have a game. I'll just put it right over here in the corner...

... might as well leave it... I never play anymore anyway....

If I quit the service, you know, I could come here... get a job in town and visit every day... except...

I don't know if I could stand it... if you could only... if you could only show me that you know I'm here... a word... a look... a touch...

I'm touching you, damnit... do you feel my hand on your face? Do you feel me holding you? If I held you tightly enough, long enough, would you know I'm here?

Damn...

Hey, here's your lunch.

I'll do it, nurse, thank you... and can't something be done about getting him a haircut? And he should go outside more often... Well, maybe you should insist... if he gets scared, all you have to do is hold his hand... Well, he lets me, so why wouldn't he let you? Try anyway... and get his hair cut... he's an officer...

Sit down now and have your lunch... I'll help... see? It's plomeek soup. Here, take a little... that's right. Don't worry, I'll clean it up with the napkin... there, all clean. Do you want some bread?

Bones doesn't think I should keep coming here... he says you don't know whether I'm here or not... that's not true, is it? You hold my hand... you must know it's me... Please eat... you're so goddamned skinny... That's the way... Why do they say you won't eat? You're eating fine...

Hey, don't be scared of the noise... it's just my communicator... You remember this, don't you? Here, put your hand on it, too... we'll both hold it....

Kirk here... okay, Scotty... I'll be there in a few minutes... I know what time it is... Kirk out....

Damn... that ship... there's never enough time...

I've got to go now... the ship is leaving orbit... Remember, I told you I wouldn't be able to stay long this time... I've got a leave coming up in only six months... only... six damned months...

Well... listen, you take care, all right?

Let me hold you for a minute... I'll come back as soon as I can... I promise.

Please, let go of my hand now... I have to go... please... let me go... I'm sorry... you do know, don't you? You do...

... bye...

Then: The door closes.

//JIM!//

He pushes the rest of the lunch away and goes to sit by the window so that he can watch the sky and wait for his sun to return. Wait for the day when he can follow that bright vision once again.

It would happen. He knew that without knowing how he knew. It was a knowledge beyond logic. They would be together again, roaming the galaxy.

He watched as the golden figure disappeared into the distance.



To love one who loves you, to admire one who admires you, in a word, to be the idol of one's idol, is exceeding the limit of human joy; it is stealing fire from heaven.

-- Mad. de Girardin

Worlds Apart

By Pete Kaup

*Comet burning lasting thru eternity
Leader of beings
Healer of men
Speaker of logic
Bound together worlds apart*

*On the Iowa farm lands
He dreamed of fields with stars
Like heroes past he flew their seas
His sails unfurled a silver bird
To him alone she'll yeild her love
For he is the leader of beings
The Captain for all*

*Plantations green of Georgia
He grew to lofty places
Home, wife and child his world complete
Then all was gone and lost
So he took to the skies
For he is the healer of men
The Doctor for all*

*Red sky and desert gold
Life planned for him to lead
He fought to just survive
Half belonging half alone he left
Now black space and human desert is his
For he is the speaker of logic
The Vulcan for all*

*Comet burning lasting thru eternity
Captain
Doctor
Vulcan
Worlds apart together forever*



THE ENCHANTED

BY MARTHA J. BONDS

"Meet me in my quarters, Spock."

The Vulcan First Officer of the Enterprise reached to switch off the intercom. Wearily, he began putting away the data tapes he'd been working on in the computer section, then rose to follow the order Kirk had given.

The words his Captain had spoken still rang in his ears. Spock had noticed the controlled tension in the voice, the intensity behind the nonchalant phrases. It was a request Kirk had made more than once in the past two days. One part of Spock's logical mind remained a detached observer to what was happening between them, curious about the scientific nature of the phenomenon. Yet Spock also recognized the emotional impact of the situation. As the hours went by, it became more and more difficult for him to remain aloof.

At first he thought his own Vulcan control and Kirk's command discipline would be enough; now he saw that their combined physical strength, willpower and intellect were insufficient. Still, much was unknown to them. He had tried, unsuccessfully, to analyze what had happened. He knew they had been attacked on the planet Reve; both of them remembered the sickening paralysis and suspended feeling of being enmeshed by a silvery, amorphous mass after having been lured into a cave by unusual tricorder readings. Yet there were many unanswered questions. What had attacked them? Some thing -- or entity or creature -- but they were unsure of its nature. It did not seem intelligent or capable of communication with them.

The attack had been brief, but painful. They had been nearly smothered by a glowing, humid fog. Gasping for breath, sure that death had at last found them, Captain and First Officer had reached out, grasping each other's hands, pulling close in a death embrace. Dizzying pain accompanied by shock waves convulsed their bodies. They were jolted apart, falling side by side to the floor of the cave, aware only of the sensation of suffocating and an aching emptiness that reached to the depth of the soul.

Then, the mist began to fade. The fog sank in around them, seemingly absorbing into their bodies. The pain reached a crescendo and Spock vaguely remembered that Kirk had reached to clutch his hand again. Abruptly, it was over. Dazed, weak and covered with a residual moisture from the fog, they lay back, too stunned even to think for a while.

When he finally managed to rise, Spock picked up his fallen tricorder. No sign of the previous readings remained -- except for trace amounts in the proximity of his own body and Kirk's.

Immediate beam-up to Sickbay was indicated. Spock had to assist Kirk, who seemed more disoriented and weak after several moments had passed than he had just seconds after the attack. Spock took his hands and pulled him to his feet, then supported him until he steadied. In a moment, though, the Captain seemed to come out of his lethargy. Together, they beamed back to the ship and went to see McCoy.

Now, Spock moved down the corridor, the time since the attack blurring in his mind, as he drew nearer to Kirk's quarters. The doctor's prognosis, his own scientific expertise -- neither meant anything now. He knew only one thing. Kirk had called and he must go to him.

The entity had absorbed into them, dividing itself so that each housed only half of the parasitic organism. The answers of how and why still eluded them, and at the moment Spock did not care. His half seemed stronger somehow, while Kirk's grew periodically weaker. Just as the Captain had been strengthened when Spock supported him in the cave, they had found that clasping each other's hands helped when Kirk became weak and confused. A distinctly unhealthy situation, Spock realized, one that was growing more serious by the hour.

He paused outside Kirk's door, forgetting the inherent dangers of continuing with their present course of action, forgetting the doctor's frantic lab studies in an effort to free them from the dependency. Kirk had called him, and he knew what form of answer was needed.

The Captain stepped from the sleeping alcove and Spock recognized the look in his eyes, haunted, as weary as his own, but filled also with awesome, alien hunger. Kirk's face was covered with a sheen of sweat and as Spock watched, the silvery glow seemed to surround him once again.

Spock found himself drawn by that aura; he felt light-headed and weak as the silver net reached out for him. As he was pulled closer to Kirk, the last of his misgivings fell away, replaced with a tangible desire to satisfy the desperate hunger.

He reached to clasp Kirk's outstretched hands, but the Captain backed up into the sleeping alcove. Spock followed, his eyes locked on Kirk's. He sensed that the aura was pulsating now, demanding and strong. Kirk's eyes were glazed, the gnawing hunger causing them to glow with an urgent vulnerability.

A flicker of some unidentifiable feeling passed through Spock. He stepped into the throbbing essence, touching Kirk's waiting fingers. Then, with devastating force, the silvery net closed in around them. Kirk grasped the Vulcan's hands and yanked with a desperate strength, crushing Spock to him.

The hunger went deeper now, Spock could see. It claimed the depths of Kirk's soul, all the strength in his body. Spock responded to that need, pressing closer, wrapping his arms around Kirk's back, even as the emotion he'd experienced earlier took form -- it was fear of what was doing this to them, of what it was causing them to become.

Then it began again, the soaring sensation of meeting Kirk's emptiness and filling it with himself. Lulled by the false euphoria of the linkage, they clung together, a quivering mass of giving and receiving.

The last of Spock's barely recognized fear was purged away as the parasite took dominance over mind and body. It paid well for what it asked of them...

A world of bright sensation burst around him as the entity's reward for cooperation stirred within. Ripples of pleasure teased the smooth-lake surface of his stoicism, grew into waves that drenched and delighted him.

Higher, higher still, all feeling intensified until he thought he could stand no more. The silvery light that was blinding him, the dizzy draining of his mental and physical resources, the sound of Kirk's tortured breathing roaring in his ears created sensory overload; pleasure tottered on the brink of pain and consciousness faded from him as the silver web tightened chokingly.

When he awoke, Spock found that they had fallen to the bunk. Kirk lay across his chest, his arms still desperately tangled around the Vulcan. His breathing was deep with sleep and satisfaction.

"Jim," Spock began. The Captain did not stir, and Spock reached a hand to touch his shoulder, thinking to nudge him awake. Abruptly, his hand halted, unable to complete the gesture. He was suddenly ill at ease, made so by the intimacy of what had just transpired.

Spock's eyes took in the relaxed contours of Kirk's face. There was an uncommon strength in the man, combined with an odd vulnerability that had long ago reached out to the Vulcan. Spock had responded to the warmth of Kirk, to his strengths and needs, giving more than loyalty. He had called the man friend.

How many times had the emotions he had so long denied been forced to the surface because of Kirk? The first tentative recognition of friendship, the increasing rapport between the two men and finally the depth of their closeness had been admitted by the Vulcan, though not verbally. Spock knew that Kirk was aware that he cared.

And there were other emotions Spock felt. Deep, soul-searing fear went through him whenever Kirk was endangered, when he was lost, or when, as so often happened with his daring human, he placed himself in jeopardy for the safety of the crew and ship. Alongside the fear for Kirk's life grew a strange protectiveness that the Vulcan constantly attempted to hide. He knew, in fact had shown more than once, that he would give his own health and life to protect Kirk. And as time went on, he found that he had to curb a tendency to worry somewhat illogically about his Captain, a man who was quite capable of taking care of himself -- most of the time.

There had been times when physical and emotional suffering had brought them close. Spock had learned the benefits of comforting and being comforted, seen the deeper communication that could be achieved through touch. Still, when things were put to rights again, both he and Kirk usually moved back into their more reserved roles. Perhaps it was the price they both paid for meeting life and their relationship so intensely.

Spock lowered his hand, surprised at his reaction. Kirk still dozed across his chest. "Captain," the Vulcan repeated, more forcefully this time.

Kirk stirred languidly, long lashes fluttering as moist golden eyes opened. He raised his head, looking directly at his First Officer. Self-consciousness warred with gratitude for a moment in his gaze, then sheer relief won out. "Thank you," he offered simply, disengaging himself and rising to sit at Spock's side. "I don't know what to say," he went on, shaking his head. "This time it was different, more intense."

"Agreed, Captain." Spock started to sit up, but an unexpected wave of vertigo blurred his vision.

"Spock?" There was worry in Kirk's voice. "Did you feel pain, toward the end of it?" Spock hesitated and Kirk was persistent. "Did you? You cried out."

Spock closed his eyes. "No, Captain. I... blocked the sensations when they moved nearer the pain threshold."

Kirk rubbed a hand over his face. "This is getting to be more than we can handle."

"You are correct in stating that the effect was more intense this time," Spock went on. "I was drawn to you quite strongly and felt," he paused, searching for a detached way of stating it, "more varied sensations."

Kirk met his eyes. "I know what you're saying, Spock. I felt it, too, felt you giving of yourself for me. It's alien, parasitic, feeding on us this way, but I forgot all that when... when I touched you."

Spock nodded, making a second attempt at sitting up. Kirk put out a hand to help him, but at his touch, Spock pulled himself straighter. Then he stopped, abashed.

"You *are* hurt," Kirk insisted.

"Weakened only, Jim." He drew in a breath, determined to conquer his feelings and make Kirk understand. "I assure you, it is only my own... conflicting and somewhat illogical reactions that..."

Kirk smiled and Spock relaxed. "Okay. We have enough of a problem without communications

getting in the way."

"Agreed." Spock shivered suddenly in the cabin's chill air.

Kirk pushed a sweat-dampened lock of hair off his forehead. "Sorry," he said, moving to re-set the temperature. "I forgot how the cold affects you. This thing seems to make me feel feverish."

The Vulcan and human regarded each other solemnly for a moment as the strange nature of what was going on between them settled heavily on their shoulders. Kirk raised one hand in a 'what more can I say' gesture, then let it fall back to his side. Spock watched as his Captain pulled his shoulders straight, unconsciously taking the burden of their problem. The Vulcan had no more to say for the moment and only held Kirk's eyes with his own, his look extending as much stoic acceptance and understanding as he could summon.

* * * * *

Dr. Leonard McCoy ambled into the officer's mess and selected a hearty meal for himself. He turned, looking for a place to sit and found Jim Kirk's eyes on him. Strangely moved by the look of vulnerability and wistfulness on the man's face, McCoy hurried over.

The Captain's eyes rested a moment on the steaming tray, then raised to McCoy's. "Well, Bones," he said softly, "haven't seen much of you today."

The physician noted the strained attempt at lightness in Kirk's voice. "I found a lot to keep me busy." He paused, cutting into his meat, then asked with quiet significance, "And how are things with you?"

Kirk drained the cup of coffee he held. "I wish I knew." He lowered his voice. "It's like you predicted, Bones, getting worse."

"What happened?"

Kirk's eyes darted around the nearly empty room and he leaned closer to the doctor before answering. "There's a stronger... demand in me, needing more from Spock... Spock's part of the entity. We had to be closer this afternoon and the thing seemed to take over our senses more than it had before. We both felt strange sensations..."

"Yes?" McCoy prodded gently.

"It's like... a narcotic of some type. Before and after, I feel awful about being driven this way, forced by something so completely alien... but... when I'm... with Spock, I forget how bad it is, how unnatural. It seems right, somehow. I'm drowning and he saves me. I'm suffocating and he breathes life into my lungs. I'm starving and he... feeds me. And for both of us, we both feel..." He shrugged. "I don't know, Bones. I guess I'm not making much sense right now."

McCoy thought it wise to change the subject. He looked pointedly at Kirk's coffee cup. "Is that dinner?"

"I can't eat. I wish I could." Kirk's voice was morose. "I might feel more normal if I could, but I haven't been able to keep anything in my stomach all day."

McCoy quirked an eyebrow, Kirk's admission confirming his suspicion that the entity was growing stronger, taking over more and more of the human's bodily needs and functions. And they still had so little information they could use to combat the effects. The doctor had spent the day sifting through the reports made by the scientific team he and Spock had sent down to take tricorder readings on Reve's surface, trying to correlate the data he'd taken from the Captain and First Officer last night, yet he'd learned virtually nothing that could help.

Thoroughly frustrated, McCoy wanted to swear, to blurt out the day's annoyances to Kirk, but the look on the face of the man before him, so openly needful and trusting in his medical ability, stilled what might have come so easily from his lips. Right now, his commanding officer -- his best friend -- was his patient and even the 'old country doctor' image was insufficient to the

problem at hand. Chief Medical Officer McCoy pulled on his most self-assured expression and lay down his knife and fork. "Come on, Jim," he said easily. "Let's go on down to Sickbay so I can make some further tests. With the data brought in by the science team today, I'll need to check you over again."

Kirk stood, relief evident in his face. "Okay, if you promise it won't hurt." The Captain managed a wry smile.

McCoy clapped a hand on Kirk's shoulder in friendly fashion. "Not a bit, Jim," he assured. As the two moved out into the corridor, he couldn't help wishing his gesture could have been more supportive.

An hour later, McCoy was alone in his Sickbay office. He'd let Kirk go back to his quarters after taking some additional blood and tissue samples and throwing around enough double-talk medical jargon to ease his patient's concern that an answer to the problem could be found. Yet what McCoy had learned that day only supported his earlier conclusions. Kirk and Spock had been attacked by a gaseous cloud that, once attuned to their individual systems, had divided itself between them. While at first it had appeared that the mist was not a life form, McCoy had now decided that the entity did qualify as living. It had adapted perfectly to the human and Vulcan bodies housing it, drawing strength from their life forces.

And it had also become apparent to the doctor that one half of the entity could not exist without the other. The portion residing in Kirk required constant contact with Spock's half. The physical touching seemed to renew, to feed the part of the entity in Kirk when it grew periodically weaker. Thus strengthened, Kirk's part of the parasite then took over more of the human's bodily functions. It now appeared to control his heart rate, breathing and metabolism. McCoy's tests showed that these functions had all been slightly altered in the human host. As the voracious appetite of the parasite increased, so it seemed that it would eventually control Kirk completely. Though the man's personality had not yet been affected, McCoy could not help but worry that this would be the eventual result.

And what of Spock? So far, his half of the entity seemed capable of feeding Kirk's portion. It appeared as if the strength and stamina of the life form were housed in the Vulcan's body, while the controlling force had become a part of Kirk. As Kirk's portion grew stronger, McCoy wondered if it would eventually be capable of functioning on its own and if it would finally deplete the reserves within the Vulcan. They had reported that Spock became as weak afterwards as Kirk had been before the entity forced them into close physical contact.

The takeover had been swift and unexplained. After the initial attack, it seemed that residual amounts of a foreign compound had been left on the skin of the Captain and First Officer. Later, the absorption showed up on McCoy's medical scanners. By then, the dependency between halves of the organism revealed itself and its growth had been spectacularly rapid.

McCoy flipped through the survey reports again. There was nothing in them which gave any hint as to a method for purging Kirk and Spock of the affliction. There was no further trace of the unusual tricorder readings that the officers had encountered on Reve, and no other life forms were in evidence on the planet. McCoy had found no way to test possible drugs or other means of destroying the entity. Speed was essential, but drugs or other medical and scientific means had the possibility of harming the men more severely than the entity was at present. McCoy had never felt so completely ineffective.

"Doctor McCoy."

The physician looked up. One half of the object of his concern was standing thoughtfully before him. "Spock. I didn't hear you come in."

"You were engrossed in study," the Vulcan replied.

"Have a seat," McCoy invited. "What can I do for you?"

Spock folded himself into the chair across from McCoy's desk. "You've examined the Captain?"

McCoy nodded. "Just a little while ago. I sent him back to his quarters to rest."

"And?"

"The same as this morning. The changes within his system are subtle but continuing. So far, they are confined to autonomic functions." The doctor paused. "I was just about to call you in to check on your... progress."

"I believe you will find the same is true for my condition, Doctor," Spock answered, rising as McCoy indicated and moving toward the examining room. "I am experiencing some slight weakness and difficulty in concentrating, also. I seem to be anticipating Jim's next call for me."

McCoy scowled as he recalibrated the sensors for the Vulcan. Spock's mood was odd. He'd obviously come down to Sickbay for more than just this examination, but he didn't seem ready -- or able -- to put that reason into words. "You're right," McCoy told him after a moment. "Your heart rate, breathing and metabolism show some increased alteration -- in direct proportion to the changes in Jim's body."

When Spock didn't answer, McCoy asked quietly, "When did you last see him?"

"See him?" Spock's voice grew soft, his face reflecting a gentleness McCoy had not often observed. "I've seen nothing else. My thoughts are filled with him. I..." Abruptly, the brown eyes turned back up to the human's. Spock frowned. "Doctor, what was I saying? I seem to have suffered a brief lapse."

"I think you did, Spock. Come on, let's talk in my office."

When they were seated around McCoy's desk once again, the doctor briefly related Spock's words and attitude. Spock listened thoughtfully. "Has the Captain been experiencing such disorientation?" he asked.

"Not that I've noticed," McCoy replied. "Have you had other reactions like the one a moment ago?"

"Not precisely. However, when I have come into contact with Jim, my thoughts have been increasingly confused and illogical."

"You mean emotional," corrected McCoy.

Spock met the doctor's eyes. "Yes."

"Jim spent a few moments talking to me about the problem. He described the parasitic hunger and feeding in rather euphoric terms. He knows it's an unhealthy, alien situation on an intellectual level, but at the same time..."

"I understand, Doctor. I, too, have felt a sense of euphoria."

"That could be dangerous, Spock. It could indicate a weakening of your personalities, as the entity takes over your physical functions."

"Agreed. What would you suggest to alleviate the problem?"

"Well," McCoy began slowly, thinking out loud, "perhaps I could work up some kind of medication that would keep you both from becoming so complacent. Perhaps some of the stimulants we've used to keep the crew functioning during draining situations..."

"That may take time," Spock reminded.

"True. I'd better get on it right away." McCoy hesitated. "Do you think he'll call you in the meantime?"

"Yes, I do. The last encounter was four hours ago."

"In that case, try to stay lucid, Spock. If you can't block the sense of false euphoria, at least make an attempt to study the feeling. Maybe if you can describe it more fully..."

"Indeed," Spock answered. "I will attempt to analyze the sensations and emotions involved when the Captain..."

A beep from the desk communicator interrupted him. "McCoy here."

"Bones... is Spock down there?"

McCoy lifted his eyes from the haggard view of the Captain and met Spock's gaze. The Vulcan rose and started for the door.

"He's on his way, Jim." McCoy flicked off the viewer. The doctor leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes, trying to let his mind wander away from the problem at hand so he could approach it with a clear head. Yet he could still see the haunted, alien look that had come into Spock's eyes at the sound of Kirk's voice. The look had matched the one in Kirk's, but there had been something else in the velvet brown depths, a softness, a reaching out that went beyond his usual stoic facade. McCoy rubbed a hand over his face, stood and reached for his brandy bottle and a glass from the shelf behind him. Even if the physical problem could be solved -- and at the moment he doubted if it could -- he wondered at the emotional repercussions it would cause both the Vulcan and his human Captain.

* * * * *

Even before he reached Kirk's quarters, Spock could feel the aching emptiness radiating from his Captain. The Vulcan quickened his pace, hastening to the door. He paused, though, when he entered the darkened outer office. The awful vulnerability of Kirk, who lay quiet, as if barely breathing, across his bunk, was a palpable thing, reaching out to Spock. It throbbed between them, growing stronger, more demanding, as the seconds stretched out.

Spock moved to the sleeping alcove. At the Vulcan's approach, Kirk half-opened his eyes. Sweat glistened on his bared chest and arms, the effect heightened by the surrounding silvery aura as the entity made known its increased demands. Kirk raised his head slightly and spoke, his voice husky with weakness. "Spock... it hurts."

"I know," the Vulcan answered softly, "I feel it, too." He stood next to the bed, and bending forward slightly, placed his palms on Kirk's chest.

Kirk moaned, arching his back, rising up to meet the Vulcan's touch. The pain was stronger now, as the hunger stripped the last of Kirk's strength. Spock felt it surrounding him as well, going into the pit of his being, tightening around his chest and stomach.

Kirk gasped, collapsing back on the bed. "I'm falling, Spock. Don't leave me."

The words pierced Spock deeply, cutting into his heart. He bent closer, falling with Kirk into the dark and terrible abyss that swallowed them both. Into the emptiness, Spock fell willingly. He plunged into the hunger, gladly opening his strength, his soul, to its demands.

Stronger, swifter, sweeter this time, he felt the hunger dipping into him, felt himself giving freely all he had to give. And it felt good, because it was for Kirk. He heard a roaring in his ears and knew they both were moaning as the silver net tightened the bond of their sharing.

No longer falling, they were rising together now on a cloud of euphoric giddyness. The silver glow increased; it was bright beyond measure, dazzling, fragmenting into a thousand stars of color. The stars sang around them, an unrelenting song of high, sweet notes that vibrated the air and quivered under their fingertips.

"Jim... Jim," Spock breathed, and knew his lips were close to Kirk's ear. Beneath him, Kirk's body trembled, as the pain was drawn away and the emptiness filled. Spock felt strangely moved by the sensation.

For a second, his logical overmind hesitated, trying to sort out what was happening. Even as he recognized them, the emotions stirring within crested into waves of caring and needing to give. Over and over him, they crashed, calling deeply upon his inmost reserves of strength. He was being pulled under and away from himself, into a deepening sea of hunger and need. *Analyze, describe*, his mind insisted. What had McCoy asked of him? *Try to stay lucid....*

It was no use. The strength had been drained out of him completely and now he was drowning as even the breath was sucked from his body. He gasped and struggled, pulling himself up a little, trying to see and think coherently.

The Vulcan's eyes met Kirk's and he shivered at what he found in them. The look of vulnerability was gone now, replaced with a savage, sated look. The hunger within drove him yet, though, for he still clung to Spock, his fingers biting into the flesh of the Vulcan's arms. His face wore a willful, demanding, controlling look as he held the Vulcan ever more tightly, taking pleasure at draining him, filling himself as much with his strength as on his churning emotions.

He claimed him, everything of him and the realization struck Spock suddenly, as exhaustion caused his vision to blur. Jim had taken everything he had and wanted -- demanded -- still more. No not Jim, not his Captain. The entity was in control of the human, and of himself. Sudden, familiar pain came with the knowledge, growing in intensity until he thought his heart and mind would burst.

Summoning his will as the last strength he possessed, Spock drew his eyes away from Kirk's hypnotizing gaze. He pushed away from him, knowing that contact had to be broken. The hands at his shoulders released their painful grasp and Spock fell back into himself. His mind, his body, were once again his own, yet he discovered, in a last moment of consciousness, that he had nearly lost himself. Then, his strength failed and he fainted into insensibility.

* * * * *

"Spock. Spock, wake up now." The words penetrated the haze of oblivion and, somewhat resignedly, Spock opened his eyes.

"That's better." McCoy smiled professionally. "How do you feel?"

"Where's Jim?" Spock wanted to rise but he could not even raise his head off the pillow.

"He's all right," McCoy answered in a neutral voice. "I asked how *you* feel."

"Weak," Spock admitted. "I feel... numb."

McCoy passed his scanner over the Vulcan and frowned. He took Spock's hands in his. "Squeeze my hands," he directed curtly. "Harder."

Spock attempted to comply, but he could barely press McCoy's fingers. There was little feeling in his own hands and even less strength, a most unexpected phenomenon. He raised questioning eyes to the doctor.

"Can you feel my hands at all?"

Spock nodded. "Slightly. My fingers seem to be tingling a little now."

McCoy looked relieved. "Good. The sensation's returning, then. You're probably suffering from sensory overload."

"Pain overload as well, Dr. McCoy," Spock told him. "Just as I lost consciousness, I was overcome by an intense pain, coupled with fear and the realization that I was losing myself to the entity."

A small sound, like a moan, caught his attention. Spock turned his head, seeking its source. He discovered that he was still in the Captain's quarters, lying on the bed and that Kirk himself sat at the desk on the other side of the divider screen. There was something wrong about his appearance, though. He looked withdrawn, distant.

"Jim?"

Kirk seemed to tense but did not look up. The Vulcan felt a chill, as if the screen between them had formed a silent, cold wall. That wall had to be breached, and quickly, Spock realized.

He wasn't sure what caused it, guilt feelings, emotional turmoil, or conflict with the alien presence, but the lines of communication between them had to be kept open. All they had in this was each other.

"Captain," he tried again, "we have to talk, to find out what happened and how and why." He paused, the effort of talking increased his feeling of total exhaustion. "Please, Captain."

McCoy got up from the bedside chair and went around the divider to Kirk. "Come on, Jim." He offered a hand to help him to his feet, but Kirk seemed to pull himself together and rose on his own.

Spock kept his eyes on him as he and McCoy returned to the sleeping alcove. The human's eyes were shadowed by dark circles but he did not move as if he were tired. He seemed tense, as if a tremendous, leashed power was in him, something that he was not sure he would be able to control.

The Captain sat at the foot of the bed, finally meeting Spock's eyes. "I'm... sorry," he breathed.

"Jim, I know how you feel..."

Something seemed to snap inside Kirk. "Do you, Spock?" he spoke sharply. "I find that fascinating, coming from you. Just how do I feel?"

"Now wait a minute here," McCoy tried to cut in, but both Kirk and Spock ignored him.

"I do," the Vulcan insisted. "You're feeling guilty because you think you hurt me."

Kirk didn't answer for a moment. Slowly, the look of defiance faded from his eyes. "Maybe," he conceded. "What do I do about it?"

"It cannot be helped. You -- both of us -- are being used."

"We don't seem to be able to exercise much control."

"Agreed."

"So what if I like it? What if I don't feel guilty?" Kirk's eyes had gone hard, his voice cold.

"Jim! Spock..." McCoy tried again, but the two were locked in a world of their own.

"You do like it?" Spock voiced it as a question.

Kirk smiled cruelly. "Even if it hurt. Didn't you?"

The Vulcan swallowed. If Kirk were to lose his personality to the entity, there would be no salvation for them. And he didn't know how to answer him. Some part of him, a secret, untapped and, he had always thought, unreachable part of him *had* liked it.

As if mesmerized, the Vulcan continued to stare into the fathomless, suddenly strange eyes of his Captain. Both of them were trembling.

McCoy stepped between them, breaking the eye contact with his physical presence. He emptied a hypo into Kirk's shoulder, refilled it and injected Spock.

The human slumped. He bent forward, covering his face with his hands. Spock sagged back against the bolster with his eyes closed and his face averted.

The silence stretched out a moment longer, then McCoy shifted uncomfortably. His voice was husky. "Come on, now. You two pull yourselves together."

"Oh, God," Kirk murmured. "I don't believe this, any of it." Spock looked up and watched the Captain suppress a shudder. "I... don't want to hurt, but a minute ago, I heard words coming out of my mouth, evil words, and I couldn't stop them." His voice broke.

Spock struggled to sit up and reached out tentatively for Kirk's shoulder.

"Spock, no, don't touch me." Kirk flinched away.

"It's all right, Jim," McCoy cut in. "Now, both of you, look at me." When he had their attention the doctor let his face relax into a smile. "That's better," he said. "You could cut the tension in this room with a knife. Now I want you both to just listen to me for a minute. I injected you with a kind of stimulant. It should help you keep your mind on reality. From now on, I don't want the two of you to be alone together. Between the physical difficulties and your own emotions you're losing the ability to control reality. You're both confused. You're getting your own personalities mixed up with this physical thing, and the guilt feelings are going to drive you both crazy." He paused a moment, noted that he seemed to be getting through to them, and went on, directing his next comment to the Vulcan. "Spock, tell Jim how you feel right now."

Spock hesitated a moment. "My physical strength is returning. Immediately after I awakened, I was worried about you. You seemed upset that I had been hurt. But your attitude was... disquieting..." His voice trailed off.

"Go on," McCoy said encouragingly.

"We had been... so close... and then you shut me out."

"Good, Spock. You're doing fine. Jim?"

Kirk ran a hand through his hair before speaking. "It was as if I had to push you away, physically and emotionally. I had this feeling of incredible power. I was so strong. I didn't need you or any feelings you might want to force on me." He stopped. "But you weren't trying to tell me how I should feel. I know that. And the strength and power, that wasn't me. It was the entity. It had drawn that strength from you and was struggling... for independence, I guess."

"How do you feel now, Jim?" McCoy asked.

Kirk looked away, seemingly unable to meet either Spock's or the doctor's eyes. "I'm scared. I feel like I'm losing myself. I'm being drowned and I'm pulling Spock down with me." He looked up. "Bones, I felt him fading. I knew he was suffering, but I kept taking more. I'm afraid I'll take too much."

"That's why I don't want you two to be alone. You're exerting a hypnotic effect over Spock, even now, and at the moment you're both completely rational. Not only that," the doctor hesitated, "but you could drain Spock's strength so much that he might not be able to regain his own will."

Kirk looked up sharply. "What does that mean?" There was concern in his voice.

"He was very weak after this last time, Jim," McCoy said softly. "The sensory overload and the pain placed a big strain on his heart."

No one spoke for a moment. The doctor's meaning was perfectly clear to the Vulcan, but he wondered if it was as evident to Kirk. The human seemed worried but the true gravity of the situation might still not be apparent to him.

Kirk's voice was dull. "What do we do?"

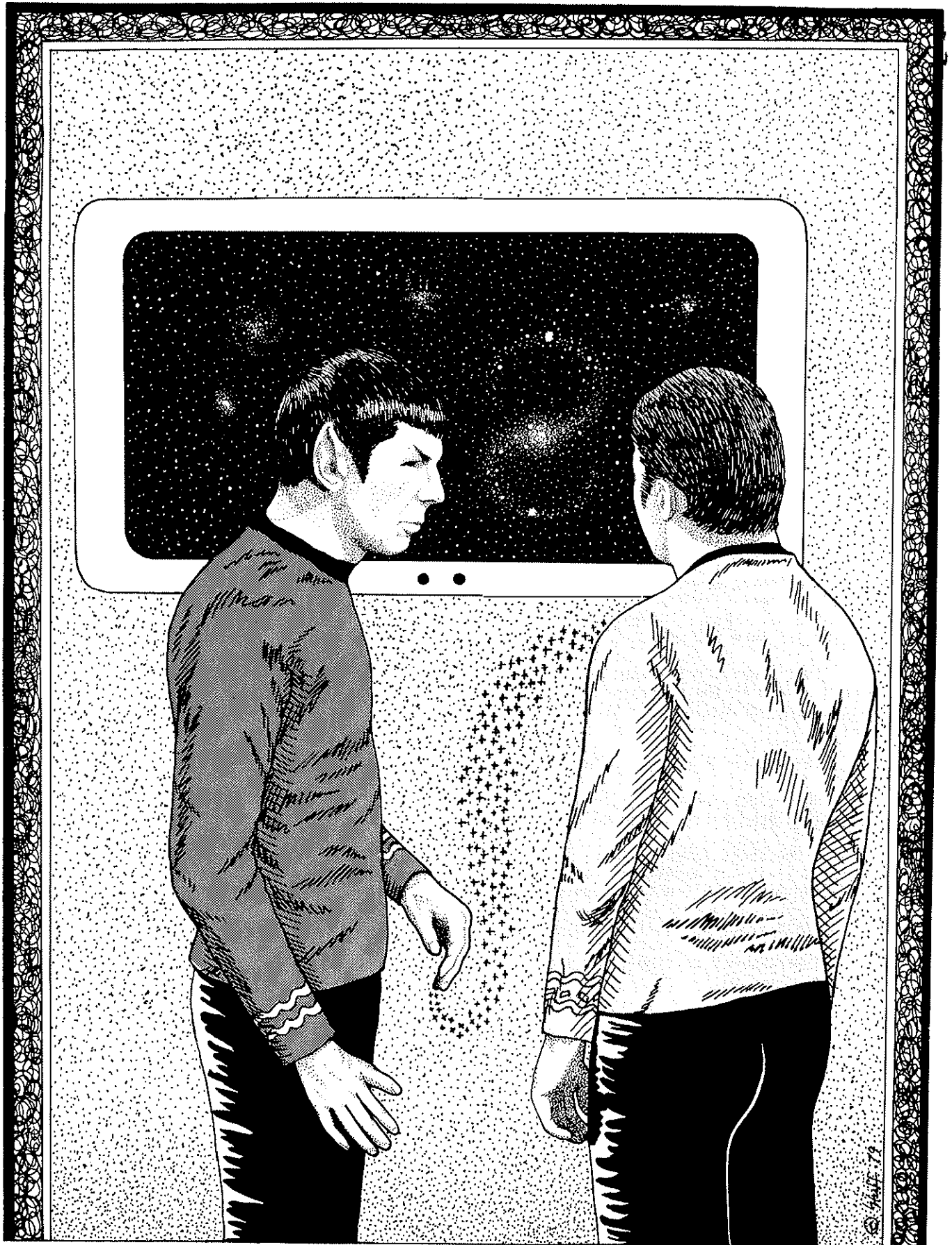
"I want Spock to stay right where he is and get some rest. You, I want down in Sickbay -- complete physical."

Kirk groaned. "Not again."

"Come on, I've got a great bedside manner," McCoy said gently.

As they started for the door, Kirk turned back and took a long look at Spock. "I am sorry."

"Jim." The Vulcan's voice was warm. "Please stop reproaching yourself. We are... in this together, after all."



Kirk managed a smile. "Get some rest now, okay?"

The Captain dialed the lights down on his way out, leaving Spock still lying on his bunk. Exhausted, the Vulcan curled on his side and fell asleep almost immediately.

The world created by his dreams was a soft, warm haven, far distant from the troubled reality he had been inhabiting. The first dreams were full of comfortable familiarity. He found himself walking through the long Enterprise corridors on his way to the bridge.

He worked at his station, for a while totally absorbed in his work. Then a presence distracted him. He turned, and found smiling human eyes regarding him.

"Come with me, Spock." And he followed. He joined Kirk in the turbolift that carried them to a brightly colored dream universe.

They were in Kirk's quarters, facing each other across a chessboard. Spock could not see the pieces, was unable to tell who had the advantage. It was all right, though, neither could lose. They were perfectly matched in this game and both were winning.

Kirk smiled at him again, and the expression tugged at the inner recesses of Spock's heart. The human turned his head to look out of the viewing port. The stars, in all their magical magnificence, beckoned. They watched, spellbound for a moment. Kirk was entranced, enchanted by their brilliance. Spock saw the myriad points of light and while he understood them scientifically, he knew them also as distant suns around which spun the tiny worlds of uncounted beings. If he could instantly transport himself to any planet, would he choose to go? No. He could not be a part of any world but this.

Kirk watched the stars and Spock, his eyes leaving the endless silver tapestry, watched Kirk. Slowly, his hand raised, moving ever nearer the human until his fingertips just touched his shoulder.

A brilliance of sensation, rich in texture, warm and close, flowed into him. He held his breath, embarrassment nearly driving him to drop his hand, but Kirk turned to look at him, laughing away Spock's shyness. The warm, ever-changing eyes looked deep into him, into the secret depths of his heart, down, down to the unknown, whispered dreams. Awakening, they rose up to meet the human, joined with his offering of companionship.

Kirk took his hand, urging, and the Vulcan followed. They were part of the tapestry now, interweaving their bodies and souls among the stars. Somehow, the endless night seemed less black and cold. If they shed tears, it was in joy.

The logical, ever-temperate mind warned that this was impossible, that they could not exist alone in space. Environmental suits, oxygen, lifelines, without these they would die. *Of course not*, Spock found himself laughing with Kirk. This was their dream; they had the power...

Facing each other, floating outstretched with hands clasped, they shared their dream flight. There were no more fears. Kirk knew all his secrets now and all Spock had had to do was call him by name. Together, set free on the wings of their own symbiosis, power surging between them...

They stood looking at each other, still warm under familiar red skies, but somehow, the closeness was fading. Spock tried to reach out. He knew Kirk was calling him, but the voice came from within a bruised and crying soul. A cold cruelty was destroying him, leaving the human's spirit alone in the red-streaked night. The rest of him was consumed by an alien thirst, a feverish hunger. He needed... he needed.

Spock reached out, but in his hands was a weapon, alien-feeling, yet familiar. Kirk, too, was armed and they circled on the quartz-flecked sand, each measuring the other.

Kirk charged. Spock dodged the blow. Attack. Parry. Challenge. A silvery web tightened around them, destroying even as it drew them close, pain following on the heels of tenderness. Kirk was calling him, repeating his name over and over again in a choked and desperate voice. Spock responded to that call, lunging forward even as Kirk's blade flashed.

It found its mark, slashing into his mid-section. His life's blood flowed out, he sank to his knees, then collapsed back into the sand. "Jim. Jim," he cried. The human fell on him, pressing his lips to the torn edges of flesh, tasting his blood. Spock felt the life

draining out of him and into Kirk. He gave and gave until he was emptied of his sustaining force and every thought, each emotion had been sucked out of him. It was not enough...

"No!" Spock lurched awake. His eyes opened to the dim familiarity of Kirk's quarters. Shaking, he sat up, trying to draw deep, calming breaths.

The fearful, compelling dream images remained in his mind. Their meaning was clear; the commingling of sharing and need, of passion and pain reflected the nightmare he and Kirk lived in their waking hours. And the lesson, that the alien symbiotic relationship would end in death, was obvious.

The picture of Kirk drunk on the taste of Spock's blood and the power he drew from him had been horrifying. The loving expression had been burned out of his eyes, only alien coldness remained.

No. That wasn't Jim. He wasn't responsible. Spock had felt, even at the last agonizing second, that somewhere the human's heart still lived, that he had tried not to succumb to the entity that drove him.

Spock shivered, a chill of revulsion still lingering. He was soaked in sweat, his damp clothes sticking to him. He rose abruptly. Suddenly, he had to get out of the room, into the secure safety of his own quarters where he could wash away the traces of his fears and find a way to leash his runaway emotions.

* * * * *

Ten minutes after the Captain had left Sickbay to report to the bridge, McCoy sat at his desk, wondering how to begin the log entry that he had to make. The doctor was worried. He had all the life science departments working on the problem and still they had come up with nothing.

Kirk's condition had deteriorated. His EEG showed that his brain circuitry pattern had been altered, but there was nothing with which to compare it. He was being taken over by the entity, as Mira Romaine had been by the consciousness of the last inhabitants of Zetar, but the entity that was becoming Kirk was so alien there was no way to predict what the result would be. The increased electrical activity in Kirk's brain might soon add up to enough to kill him, but McCoy feared that his entire metabolism and physiology would change so much, drawing strength from Spock, that Kirk would not die. He'd become an alien. His life, as James Kirk, would be ended, and McCoy didn't care to speculate on the possibilities of what would then have to be done with him.

Already, there were personality changes in evidence. Kirk approached the problem with a maddening stoicism. He kept insisting that McCoy would find a logical answer and a cure. He seemed unaware that the problem centered around himself, he was above emotionalism on the subject for the most part, especially during the hours between encounters with Spock. It was as if, in drawing on the Vulcan's strength, Kirk had taken in a part of his logical attitude as well.

Yet there was an undercurrent of his own strong vitality still there. He was not willing to give himself up to the entity. He even insisted in attending to his duties on the bridge, and since the Enterprise was still in orbit around the planet Reve, McCoy saw no reason to dissuade him. And he was worried about Spock, fearing that he would be hurt, both physically and emotionally by the experience, though McCoy had noted that Kirk seemed unaware that the Vulcan's life was in jeopardy.

Spock seemed drawn to Kirk, linked in a way that went beyond telepathic technique. Spock would give his last ounce of strength and there might come a time when Kirk would need more. McCoy feared that when Kirk's part of the entity became so strong that the human's personality was totally sublimated, he would not be able to stop himself. He would kill Spock. What would happen if the Vulcan died was uncertain. Perhaps Kirk would follow, for there would be no source of nourishment for the parasite within him. Or, the death of Spock might mean that the entity no longer needed to be fed. It would live, but Kirk would be gone.

McCoy sighed heavily. No matter what, his circular thought patterns returned to the same conclusions.

* * * * *

Spock felt better after he had showered. He had washed away the dream, cleansing himself of the horror and gaining control of his conflicting emotions. He emerged feeling somewhat refreshed and ready to help Kirk confront the problem.

Instead of dressing in his uniform, Spock stepped into the sleeping alcove to get a soft sand-colored Vulcan robe out of a drawer. He had just finished slipping it on and was tightening the belt when he suddenly felt that he was not alone.

Whirling around, he saw Kirk seated in a carved chair in the corner. The Captain smiled, his glittering eyes reaching Spock even in the dim light. "I always thought you could tell when you were being watched." The Captain's voice was teasing, soft, but with a slightly self-conscious undertone.

The Vulcan covered his embarrassment and fought down the impulse to ask Kirk why he had not made his presence known. "Perhaps my mind had been occupied by other concerns," he said lightly. He watched as Kirk stood and paced to the other side of the room. "How do you feel, Captain?"

Kirk shook his head. "I don't know. Tense, keyed-up, as if there's a tremendous amount of pent-up energy inside me." He was still moving, his eyes darting around the confines of the room. "Don't you think it's sort of close in here?"

Spock didn't answer, though he moved to adjust the thermostat. "You seem... restless."

Kirk sat down, but continued to fidget. "Yeah. I guess so. I told McCoy I was going to the bridge, but I couldn't go up there feeling like this."

"It might have provided some distraction."

"I doubt it." Kirk paused. "I wanted to see you, anyway. I feel... all right, at least for now, and I thought we might talk a bit."

Spock moved to sit on the bed. "How did the examination go with McCoy?"

"He gave me a lot of double talk. I'm not about to let this thing get the better of me. I'll admit that during that last time and right after I felt sort of lost and disoriented, but now I'm perfectly okay. I am acting like myself, aren't I?"

"I don't really think it's possible to act completely normal under such circumstances as these," Spock equivocated.

"That's an unusual attitude for you to take," Kirk observed, missing the point of the Vulcan's statement. "You're usually the one who retains his composure no matter what. How's that old saying go? 'If you can keep your head when all about you are losing theirs...'"

"Did McCoy say that he had learned anything new?" Spock asked, changing the subject.

"No. All the science teams are stumped. He kept asking strange questions, though. Like how I could tell when you were weakening and how I felt about that. I told him it just suddenly felt as if you -- your life forces -- were fading out. I wanted to stop, but it was difficult. I couldn't seem to let you go and yet I was afraid I'd hurt you."

"Did the doctor indicate that I could be harmed?"

"No, he didn't say anything more beyond what he told both of us, that it was putting a strain on your heart."

"I see." Spock was slightly surprised that Kirk seemed unaware of the mortal danger involved.

The Captain went on. "I'm confident of that Vulcan strength of yours. It's the emotional strain that worries me most."

Spock looked away. "I will deal with it after we have overcome the problem."

"What if we don't?"

"Then, I suppose we will have to come to terms... "

"You're hedging, Spock." The teasing note was back in Kirk's voice and the self-consciousness was gone. Spock looked at him, finding a cold glint in his eyes. Kirk continued. "You know, I was worried about this thing being one-sided. But I guess you are getting something out of it. I know how it makes *me* feel..."

"Captain, please." It was Spock's turn to pace. He walked away to the far end of the room, trying to put as much distance between himself and this sudden stranger as possible. Kirk was implying things he would never normally bring up. Spock himself barely knew how to deal with ordinary feelings of friendship; he had hardly had time to come to terms with the complex aspects of their changed situation.

"Don't be embarrassed." Kirk smiled without warmth. "As you said, it's something we're sharing." He stood up and started toward Spock, but hesitated, swaying slightly.

"Captain?"

"It's nothing." Kirk rubbed his eyes. "I felt a little weak. What was I saying?" He took a step closer. "You look funny, Spock, sort of... disturbed. Did I say something that bothered you?"

Spock swallowed, accepting that Kirk's aberrant behavior was out of the human's control. "No, Captain. Everything is quite all right."

"Good. I..." Kirk paused, wincing. He tensed, as if his stomach hurt him.

Worried, Spock stepped closer. Like walking into a wall, he was suddenly aware of the draining hunger that was beginning to take Kirk over. "You don't look well, Captain," he said carefully. "Perhaps we should call the doctor."

"Why, Spock?" Kirk looked up suspiciously. "Afraid of me?"

"No, of course not." Spock almost took a step back, but held his ground. He could feel it even more strongly now, something he couldn't ignore even if he wanted to. He did remember McCoy voicing concern that they should not be alone, however.

Kirk met his eyes. The Vulcan stared into them, fascinated by the depth and variation of color. Kirk's eyes were large, moist and beautiful, seeing so much, things Spock had hidden even from himself. Compelling eyes... McCoy had said... he couldn't remember. The vague fear slipped away from his grasp, receding to a buried part of his consciousness, crowding half-denied feelings to the surface in its place.

Kirk moved swiftly, cat-quiet, even as the silver glow pulsed between them. He took Spock around the waist, pulling their bodies close. For a split second, the Captain's eyes were pain-filled and Spock was engulfed by a compassion stronger than anything he'd ever felt. He threw his arms about Kirk, ready to give anything rather than let that hurt continue. Bright, dizzying pleasure shot through him, echoed by the ecstatic look in the human's eyes. *No, not human...*

The thought slid away from Spock along with everything else. The room faded, the ship disappeared. They were locked together floating, soaring through stars that were spellbound by their presence.

Every nerve in his body opened to the sensation. It sang through him; he trembled as it reached a new shrill pitch, lancing over him like an electric current. Spock opened his mouth in a soundless cry as white hot agony shot into his body, bursting before his eyes like a thousand novae.

The stars disappeared. An endless cold night shrouded him and even Kirk was gone. For an instant, Spock thought he was alone, but someone -- something -- was nearby. It reached inside him, cold stabbing fingers that squeezed his heart, wringing the last of his strength.

"Please..." The word was half-moaned into the unhearing darkness.

"Spock. Oh, Spock." It was Kirk. Somehow, he was still there, dying, needing Spock to live. The Vulcan couldn't fight back. Without him, Kirk would not survive. The pain dissolved as he poured all his strength, every morsel of his being into the greedy hands that clutched his heart.

* * * * *

"My God! Jim, no!" McCoy's shout went unheard. The doctor had gone looking for Kirk when he learned he had not reported to the bridge. Arriving at the door to Spock's cabin, he had heard the sounds of a struggle within. As the doctor rushed inside, he could see two figures writhing on the bed. Spock's head was thrown back, desperate, strangling gasps torn from his throat. Kirk lay across him, a death grip on the Vulcan's biceps. The muscles in Kirk's neck and arms stood out in bold relief and his face was contorted into an evil, alien visage.

As McCoy crossed to them, Spock's eyes rolled back, and the sound of his breathing stopped. His body went slack, but still Kirk clung to him.

"Jim, stop! You're killing him!" McCoy's cry went unheeded and the doctor grabbed Kirk, trying to pull him away. The Captain let out an angry roar and held to the Vulcan even more tenaciously. McCoy struggled with him, wrenching his hands off Spock.

The doctor shoved Kirk away, shaking him, trying to bring him to his senses. Kirk seemed to want to fight him for a moment, as if still attempting to get to Spock, then he went limp in McCoy's arms and collapsed. McCoy eased him onto the deck and turned to help the unconscious Vulcan.

The physician started in surprise; for an instant, his instruments showed a decrease in brain activity. The electrical impulses seemed to have shut down to a near fatal level, but without an EEG he couldn't tell for sure. Then, the readings returned to normal. The scanner indicated a slight heart flutter. McCoy injected a tiny amount of cordrazine and in a moment, the Vulcan's eyelids opened.

"Welcome back," McCoy greeted him softly. Seeing that he was searching for Kirk with his eyes, the doctor reassured him. "I'm going to check him right now. You rest easy."

Kirk was already regaining consciousness. McCoy put out a hand to help him, but he shrugged it off. "I am not in need of assistance, Doctor."

"I see. How do you feel?"

"Wonderful. I feel just wonderful." He glanced beyond McCoy to Spock.

"I'm sure you do," McCoy agreed sourly. "It doesn't seem to matter that you almost killed Spock."

Kirk took a step toward the bed. McCoy moved to block his path. "He merged willingly with me, Doctor. It is a symbiosis, a completion even more perfect than human love or Vulcan bonding." His eyes raked the Vulcan's form.

"No, it's not," McCoy returned. "It's a parasitic dominance. And one I'm not sure either of you will survive. We almost lost Spock this time."

Kirk wasn't listening. His eyes were on Spock's haggard face and the Vulcan seemed lost to anything but his Captain.

"Jim!" McCoy touched his arm.

For a moment his voice sounded more natural. "It's all right, Bones. Spock understands." He moved to stand directly over Spock, holding out his hands. Entranced, the Vulcan reached up, ready to clasp Kirk's fingers.

McCoy moved before he could think. He caught Kirk on the side of the neck with a sharp blow. Kirk went down and Spock paled.

"Doctor!" he gasped.

"He's going to kill you, Spock." McCoy's voice was hoarse.

"Without me, he'll die."

"Spock, I... "

"You forget, Doctor, that I know something of what he's going through. To need something so desperately, to be driven to the point of madness to take what is needed... " He looked up, black eyes shining with emotion. "How can I refuse him, McCoy?"

The doctor bent over Kirk's unconscious form while he attempted to assimilate what the Vulcan was saying. He turned and saw Spock watching him. In deference to the Vulcan's concern, he reached to arrange Kirk's limp body into a more comfortable position. Then, with a shudder, he realized that this was still Jim Kirk, his dear friend, and not some alien manifestation. McCoy let his touch grow gentle again as he finished with Kirk and took a scanner reading. "He's all right for the moment, Spock. Something seems to be violently stimulating his brain, but he's not in immediate danger. I want to keep him sedated, though." He tried again to make Spock understand. "We can't trust him anymore. Do you realize that these... these encounters of yours are getting closer together? It's been less than three hours."

"Yes, Doctor. I know. And I will admit that this one took me rather unaware." Spock's face reflected an inner turmoil. "We were just talking... "

McCoy sat on the bed next to him. "I know. Take it easy."

Spock swallowed and McCoy was touched by the attempt at keeping his emotions in check. When he spoke, the deep voice was controlled, but rich with feeling. "Doctor, that man has done more for me than I could ever repay. More than I can even describe. I owe him my life a dozen times over. Can I let him die now?"

As Spock paused, another piece of the puzzle dropped into place for McCoy. Kirk had drawn a measure of logic from the Vulcan and the sharing seemed to be reciprocal. Spock was showing and expressing emotions in the same calm and genuine way Kirk did. Even the words he'd used were the same. *'I owe him my life a dozen times over.'* McCoy remembered Kirk saying the identical thing about Spock. That situation so long ago had had painful similarities to the one now, as the Vulcan had pointed out. McCoy sighed. He wondered if Spock knew how much love he revealed in the way he looked at Kirk.

The Vulcan started speaking again, sounding more human than McCoy had ever heard. "You know how I've lived my life. I've had opportunities to tell him, but let them slip by."

"That's not true, Spock. He knows."

"In this, though, I can *show* him. I care and there's one very concrete thing I can do."

"You're a Vulcan. Maybe you're seeing this as the logical thing to do, but surely killing yourself -- letting *him* kill you... "

"It's something I'll do willingly."

"But what happens if... you die? We have no guarantee that Jim will survive. Without you, he might just burn himself out, within hours. And if he does live, he won't be Jim Kirk anymore. We don't know what he'll be."

"He'll fight," Spock insisted. "He won't lose himself to the entity."

"Spock, you're wrong. If he's so strong, he ought to be able to keep from hurting you."

The Vulcan couldn't answer that and McCoy kept on. "So we can't condemn him to becoming that entity, Spock. We've got to try something else first."

"Do you have a suggestion?"

"Yes. I'm going to keep you away from him for a while. You need sleep anyway. I'm going

to take him down to Sickbay and sedate him. I've had the lab working... "

"He told me there have been no results to your attempts to find a cure."

"But I've had a few leads. I thought of trying decompression and there's a drug that might..." His voice trailed off. Spock wasn't listening. He was watching Kirk again. "All right, Spock?"

The Vulcan answered without taking his eyes from Kirk's face. "Whatever you say, Doctor. I doubt, though, whether your attempts will do any good." He turned to look at McCoy, affection evident in his gaze. "No aspersions cast on your competency, of course. It merely seems we have finally found a situation from which you cannot extricate us."

"Spock, I..." McCoy's throat was suddenly tight.

"It's all right, Doctor. Do try. You have, after all, always been here for us."

"Yeah." McCoy swallowed. "Get some sleep, Spock." Without looking at him, he patted the Vulcan's shoulder awkwardly, then stood and moved to the intercom. First things first. He'd call for a medical team and get the Captain to Sickbay. No use in thinking about the possible repercussions of the traumatic situation now. There might not be a need.

* * * * *

He was enshrouded by a smoky gray cloud of sleep. Feeling heavy and warm, it would have been so easy to continue that way, but he couldn't. Something was prodding him, urging him to awaken. He didn't want to think, or to move, but some strange power surged through him, stimulating his mind and body.

Suddenly, he couldn't stand the heavy, sedated feeling any longer. Claustrophobic, he began to struggle against the sleep. He had to get up, get out. He had to get away.

His heart pounding frantically, he was pulled awake. Kirk opened his eyes and was surprised to discover that he lay on a bed in Sickbay. The last thing he remembered, he'd been talking to Spock in the Vulcan's quarters. What had happened?

He rubbed at his temples as a sudden headache began to throb. It was hard to remember. He knew the conversation with Spock had had an undercurrent of alien feelings. Kirk thought he had said some strange things, felt odd emotions, but he could not quite bring them into focus.

The weakness had come over him unexpectedly, he recalled, draining him, and with a deeper, sharper pain than before. And with Spock so close to him, it had been easy to reach out.

He shivered as the memory of Spock's body pressed against his own emerged out of the confusion of his thoughts. The nature of the entity that afflicted them was bizarre, frightening, but there was a strange sense of tenderness to it as well. As much as he was repelled at the thought of being controlled by an alien force, the feelings of closeness and fierce pleasure that rippled through his nerves had been quite real and strong. And he knew Spock felt it, too. Strangely, the Vulcan understood. He accepted the intimacy as a necessity. Spock at least was the one thing he could count on.

You liked it... Words, harsh and cruel sounding, came back to him. They were alien, but somehow, familiar. His own voice? Had he actually taunted Spock, mocking him with the feelings their closeness evoked?

No, he couldn't do anything like that to Spock. He couldn't throw those feelings in his face, not after what the Vulcan had done for him.

Yet if he hadn't said those words, where had they come from? The entity... Kirk shuddered as a strange chill crept over him. It was hard to believe that his personality was being sublimated by the thing inhabiting his body, but so much he half-remembered saying and doing could be explained in no other way.

Confused, Kirk tried to relax his mind and body, but he couldn't. He sat up on the edge of the bed, feeling confined by the muted walls of Sickbay.

Refusal to be dominated had been such an important part of his existence. He had fought to live even though Sargon had nearly burned out his body. He had struggled against enslavement by the Scalosians. He had never accepted the will other beings tried to force on him. Yet who he was mentally, emotionally, depended so much on what he was physically, and now with his autonomic responses being affected by the parasite, he found he was losing himself.

And not just himself. This wasn't a battle he was fighting alone. Spock was involved. The blessing he'd been grateful for a few minutes ago now took on a frightful aspect. Spock was part of this, but it was Kirk who played the role of parasite, stealing strength from the Vulcan. Revulsion twisted Kirk's stomach into a knot. How absolutely sadistic of the alien entity! Of course it repaid them with an artificial kind of pleasure. That way, the true nature of the dependency could be masked.

For the first time, Kirk was able to see exactly what was taking place between him and Spock. His part of the entity grew periodically weaker, forcing him to go to Spock. Yet there seemed to be no way to replace what he took from the Vulcan. His metabolism did not have time in the few hours between encounters to rebuild his strength. Kirk could feel him weakening. If things kept on the way they had been...

Though the Captain still could not remember everything that had taken place in the Vulcan's quarters, he had the overwhelming impression that Spock had been very near death. Kirk's stomach lurched in physical pain as he realized that further encounters would kill Spock.

Staggering, Kirk wandered across the Sickbay and out into the corridor. *Kill Spock, that's not what we came to Vulcan for...* Memories of their friendship and sharing through years of duty rose up to taunt him. *I've been so damn self-assured, so proud, so human.*

It must be late evening; the dark and deserted corridors seemed unusually humid and unfriendly. *Probably just my state of mind.* Everything seemed negative, foreign. He shook his head. It was hard to think. He was too close to everything, too close to Spock and too close to the always confident image of himself. He had to get away where he could think straight, where he could use up the terrible urgency that made him feel so restless and lost.

Sweating, shaking inside, Kirk stumbled into the transporter room, activated the controls and beamed himself down to the surface of Reve.

* * * * *

"Spock, I thought I told you to sleep." McCoy seemed surprised to see the Vulcan enter his office.

"I came to talk about the Captain." Spock's voice was low and controlled.

McCoy sighed and Spock could see that he was uncomfortable. "Well, Spock," he began, "we've run into a problem. I don't know how, but he managed to come out of the sedation. When I went to check on him, he was gone. We've been looking for him, discreetly of course, but so far..."

"He's left the ship," Spock stated flatly.

"What?" McCoy sounded incredulous, then apparently decided that Spock just might be right. "How do you know?"

"I'm not certain," Spock answered. "It's not telepathy, as you might think. I simply woke and felt a distance between us. I wasn't sure what it meant until you said he was missing."

"He's got to be found. He could die down there..."

"Without me."

"Let's not start that again, Spock. I told you, giving up your life for him will be useless."

"His strength is fading even now. If he is to retain his identity at all, I must find him."

"Spock," McCoy sounded as though his patience was wearing thin. "You can't see this thing clearly. Would Jim just leave this ship, walk out when there's a chance I could come up with something? He hasn't even got a communicator as far as I know. Does that sound like the Captain Kirk you know? I tell you, Spock, if he were going to be able to retain his own identity at all, he wouldn't be doing and saying the things he has."

Spock regarded the doctor earnestly, knowing McCoy believed what he was saying. Yet the Vulcan was just as certain about his own hypothesis. "Doctor, he has been taking strength from me. We've assumed that has been for the alien entity. But suppose it was Jim who also needed my strength. Perhaps his personality is being sublimated at this point because he simply does not have the stamina left to resist. In that case, he needs me."

McCoy shook his head, looking dubious.

"All right, Doctor," Spock went on. "I will concede that there is a high probability that you are correct. If you're not, though, and I could help the Captain to fight off the entity, it would certainly condemn him to death for me not to try."

"I don't know about that, but if you're determined, I'll get my medical supplies and a tricorder and beam down with you as soon as we find him."

"There will be no time to institute a search from the ship."

"Then how do you propose to locate him? He could be anywhere and you're not exactly in shape to go running around over miles of rugged terrain. You've only had an hour's sleep."

I already know where he is. Spock kept the thought to himself. The longer he stood talking to the doctor, the more certain he was that he would and could find his Captain. There was no way to explain how he knew and no time. Yet the doctor's intervention could prove to be a problem. "My condition is not in question, at this time. It is Jim who will not be able to do without my help for much longer."

"Spock, I don't want both of you killed by this thing," McCoy began. "God, I don't want either of you killed."

The doctor's attitude was causing him intense irritation. For a moment, Spock considered simply walking out of Sickbay and to the transporter room. Then, he relented, realizing McCoy's concern was logical; he was their doctor and their friend. "McCoy, you've often tried to understand me and I know that there is a true rapport between you and Jim. If you have any conception at all of what he and I have together... "

"I understand, Spock." The doctor's voice was intense. "Believe me, I do." He squeezed Spock's shoulder and the Vulcan did not flinch from the contact. The doctor turned, heading for his desk. "I'll alert the bridge. We can be ready to beam down in just a few minutes."

"Very well," Spock said. "I shall await you in the transporter room."

He turned and left the office, having managed the lie quite smoothly, he thought. There was, after all, nothing he could have done under the circumstances. He could risk neither the doctor's own life, nor Jim's by allowing McCoy's intervention, but he knew of no way to dissuade him from accompanying him. When Spock reached the transporter room, he beamed himself immediately to the surface of Reve.

* * * * *

Spock shivered, greeted by a cold, damp wind in his face. He looked around the barren, lifeless landscape feeling a bit forlorn. There was no sign of Kirk and his earlier certainty that he could find him now seemed like foolishness, the way humans believed in hunches. Still, the Vulcan had beamed down only an hour after Kirk. He had used the coordinates from the area

over which the transporter had been centered at that time, so the Captain could not be too far away. And if the Vulcan understood the entity that was driving him, he had a feeling that Kirk would find him.

'A feeling is not much to go on.' / *'Sometimes, Mr. Spock, a feeling is all we humans have.'* An overwhelming wave of tenderness washed over the Vulcan. Perhaps they were both to die down here. At least they could be together when it happened. Resolutely, he set out.

He walked aimlessly for several miles and was beginning to fear he would not find Kirk in time. It had been nearly three hours since the last time he had seen him and if the interval between their encounters was shortening, the Captain could die before they met again.

Suddenly, Spock felt a wave of pain and tension unlike anything he'd ever experienced. His Captain was in torment -- and nearby.

"Jim, where are you?" There was no answer. Spock repeated the call, but Kirk either could not hear him or was refusing to respond.

The Vulcan hesitated. The sensation of pain was stronger now. It required all his stamina just to remain on his feet. Slowly, he began to move, circling, trying to localize it. There was an outcropping of rock fifteen meters away. He moved off.

As he neared the shadowed area, the pain slammed into him, increasing with every step. "Captain!" he cried hoarsely.

There was a scrambling sound of rocks sliding and Kirk took off, running in the direction of the mountainside a mile away. Though he was obviously suffering, he ignored Spock and kept moving, and the Vulcan was sure he had sensed his presence long before he heard him call.

Spock followed, both of them slowed by pain and the debilitating effects of the growing entity. Kirk reached the mountain first and tried to hide himself behind loose boulders and shale.

"You can't hide, Captain," Spock panted, out of breath and already tired. "I'll find you."

"Stay away from me!" The voice that yelled back was tight, forced out through unwilling lips. "I'll kill you."

"You don't want to, Captain. You won't."

Kirk dived around a jagged piece of rock, slipped and nearly fell. "Get away!" His voice rose to a shout.

Spock stopped. "At least talk to me."

"I can't."

"Why not?"

Kirk hesitated, answering without looking at Spock. "I can't... just talk. You know that."

"I don't think you'll kill me."

"I... won't be able... to stop myself. If I can... get away.. I'll... die with dignity... as myself."

"But you'll die."

"That's better than killing you." Kirk threw the Vulcan a soul-rending gaze. "One of us has to come out of this alive, at least... "

"But you don't know that I will live. What if the part of the entity in my body destroys me after you're gone? My part might not be able to exist alone."

"Spock..." Kirk tensed, clutched his head. "Let me go." He ran, reached an overhang and began to climb.

As Spock watched, his vision blurred. Too dizzy to think or move, he had to let Kirk go.

The Captain was halfway up the hillside when Spock's equilibrium returned enough for him to get moving again. He had just started after Kirk when the human cried out in pain, lost his hold on the rocks and slid all the way down.

Spock scrambled after him and bent anxiously over his still figure. There were cuts and bruises from the sharpe shale and gravel, his tunic was torn and there was a deep gash in the center of his chest.

When he saw the blood, something inside Spock snapped. "No..." he whispered, his fingers reaching to touch the crimson flow. He was shaking, fear and pain tumbling his thoughts to confusion, crumbling his logic and strength.

The instant his flesh made contact with Kirk's blood, the human's body began trembling as violently as Spock's. His eyes opened, wild, alien, determined, yet terrified.

With a low moan, he gripped Spock by the shoulders and rolled him over, pinning him beneath his body. He hesitated a moment, capturing Spock's mind with the sheer force of his gaze.

It will all be over in a moment, Spock realized, as a calmness descended. He only wished he could blot out the sight of this hypnotizing stranger and remember the Kirk he knew -- his Captain, his friend. *All I need to do is give...* The thought evaporated as white-hot agony pierced the Vulcan's skull.

"No!" Someone was screaming, in pain and indignation. "I won't do it!"

Spock's hurt subsided a bit as Kirk released his grasp and rolled off him, dragging himself a few feet away. The Vulcan tried to get up, but sagged back in the dirt.

Kirk's body convulsed. He cried out, grabbing for a hand-hold on the rocks, in the dirt, trying to keep himself lucid and away from Spock.

He's fighting! The triumphant thought returned some clarity to Spock's mind, but he was still too weak to get up. He rolled to his side, watching Kirk's struggle, and he knew he could not help him. Getting too close would finish them both this time.

Kirk's body was wracked with spasms. The shuddering went on and on, the personality warring with an alien force, the physical body in battle against parasitic dominance.

"I... am James Kirk." The words grated out through a tortured throat. "This is my life. You... can't take it... and you... can't... have his!"

He clamped his mouth shut on a moan of pain and tried again. "You can't have me... you can't have... Spock. I... *we* won't... let... you..."

The world seemed to burst in a silent, white explosion. One second, Spock could see Kirk, feel their combined pain and the chill of the planet's evening wind, the next, everything disappeared in the brilliance which opened into and around him. There was no sound, no sensation. It was like falling in the vacuum of space, with only the white emptiness for company.

Then, a sound began, like a roaring in his ears, the noise rushed toward him as if something were approaching.

He felt a touch on his hand. Kirk was there, close beside him, floating, spinning away with him into the white, empty universe of sound.

And then, the words came.

They heard it inside their minds, a halting, gentle voice that grew out of the rushing sound, the sound that now seemed like music.

// I... need... I... need... life.// it sang.

They looked at each other. Kirk gave a very characteristic shrug and tried, "Who are you?"

// Who? I am... here... I need... //

"Why do you need our lives?" Spock asked.

// I did not understand. I did not see that you were two. I thought... only one.//

The Captain threw Spock a 'what?' expression. "Explain yourself. Why have you taken us prisoner? What do you mean to do with us? I warn you, we will fight you..."

// I have seen your... strength of will. It is that which I need. Please. //

"Our lives are not for you. We, too, want to live."

There was a pause. The strange music-sound seemed to hum to itself for a moment, then resumed speaking. *// For you... life. You will continue. Yet I need... help. You can help me... not die.//*

Kirk did not look as though he trusted the voice. "No," he began.

The sound of his words died away, fading with the music-sound and the brilliance around them. It sank in on itself, shriveling to a pin-point of light, a drop of silver on the edge of the universe.

Spock opened his eyes. Kirk's face was above him, his gaze saying a thousand things, truths that now could never be spoken. There was no choice now, it seemed. They had struggled all they could and still it appeared that the entity would use them for its own purpose. At least they felt a measure of their sanity and personality returning, and false though this pleasure might be, it was preferable to dying as unfeeling strangers.

There was pain, but they ignored it as Kirk took Spock's face in his hands. He held him for a moment, then began stroking his neck and shoulders, draining his strength with every touch. Spock reached to the depths of his being and gave and gave. They forgot to hurt, forgot their revulsion in the bright tenderness that flowed between them.

Closer, closer they moved, touching, sharing, giving and receiving. Kirk's fingers seemed to slide through Spock, dipping into his heart, finding hidden secrets the Vulcan had only dreamed existed. And, as Kirk took from Spock, his own heart was laid bare to the Vulcan.

They were merging, intertwining, becoming one body, one mind. The slow spinning motion gradually increased, fierce, sweet pleasure echoed through joined nerve endings as their naked souls stood face to face.

The silver radiance poured over them; they were pure and untouched by the world outside, knowing themselves only and each other. No fears, no shames, there were no sorrows and no unanswered questions. They went closer than brothers, deeper than any mind meld. The universe was touch and touch became knowledge and truth and love. Transcending the mental and the physical, they reached out for infinity.

* * * * *

A golden light tugged at the corners of their combined consciousness. Spock came awake first, seeing the sun and alien landscape. It was morning. They seemed to have survived the night.

The entity had forced them together for its own purposes again. He should find himself disgusted at being used, but somehow, he didn't. What had happened last night had been different. How could something be wrong that felt so right?

Kirk opened his eyes, putting out a hand to touch Spock's face wonderingly. The Vulcan knew he shared his thoughts.

A skittering, wild and tremulous sound interrupted their moment. Both of them rose, looking for its source. Before them, floating in the air, they saw a small silver-colored, translucent blob. Without even asking, they knew. It was the entity.

The thing moved toward them, spinning. *// I must give thanks. You see, I said that you would not die.*// They heard its rare, sweet music in their minds.

"We are free?" Kirk asked.

// Of course. I needed only to strengthen myself enough. Now I no longer need you.//

"Why did you have need of us in the first place?" Spock asked.

// The cave. It had been my prison.//

Kirk looked at Spock as if to say, 'that's an explanation?' "What?" he asked aloud.

// My prison. I was placed there long ago, my life force enchained. When you came near, I transferred myself into your physical body -- excuse me, bodies. As I said, I had thought you were one individual.//

"Go on," Kirk said. Spock was fascinated. With every moment, the little alien being seemed to grow stronger and more self-assured, even becoming more proficient in their language.

// I needed your strength, your personalities and your physical stamina.// The music danced a triumphant staccato. *// I knew that I would win!*//

Kirk looked at Spock. "A genie in a bottle?"

"Captain?"

"Who imprisoned you?" Kirk asked.

They were interrupted by the sound of a new music, deeper, slower, with patience and strength. *// YOU HAVE WON NOTHING ON YOUR OWN, LITTLE ONE.*//

The silver entity bobbed, turned upside down and sank a little closer to the ground. Beside it, a larger, golden orb floated. Apparently, the new voice-music was coming from it.

Without answering the newcomer, the little silver being floated closer to Kirk and Spock as if for protection. *// This is the one, the Stronger,*// it hissed in confidential tones. Then, turning to the interloper, it began bravely, *// I thanked them. They gave me their strength. I live again and you cannot return me to the cave.*//

// NO, I SHALL NOT,// the golden thing answered, its rich, musical tones seeming wise and benign, *// BUT ONLY BECAUSE YOU HAVE BECOME WHAT I WISHED YOU TO BE. A FORTUNATE COINCIDENCE...*//

// What? But you sent me away saying I would never understand... what is that word... love?// The lilting notes sounded almost petulant.

// AND YOU HAVE LEARNED, HAVE YOU NOT? YOU ACTED IN A HARSH AND CRUEL WAY. YOU COULD HAVE KILLED. WHAT STOPPED YOU?//

There was a pause. *// I saw that they were each willing to die so that the other might live. And when they touched, there was no hurting, only gentleness and understanding. I had been so alone...* //

// INDEED,// answered the stronger. *// AS I SAID, YOU HAVE LEARNED. THAT IS WHY YOU ARE FREE. YOU HAVE GAINED GENTLENESS AS WELL AS STRENGTH, LEARNED COURAGE AND SHARING.*//

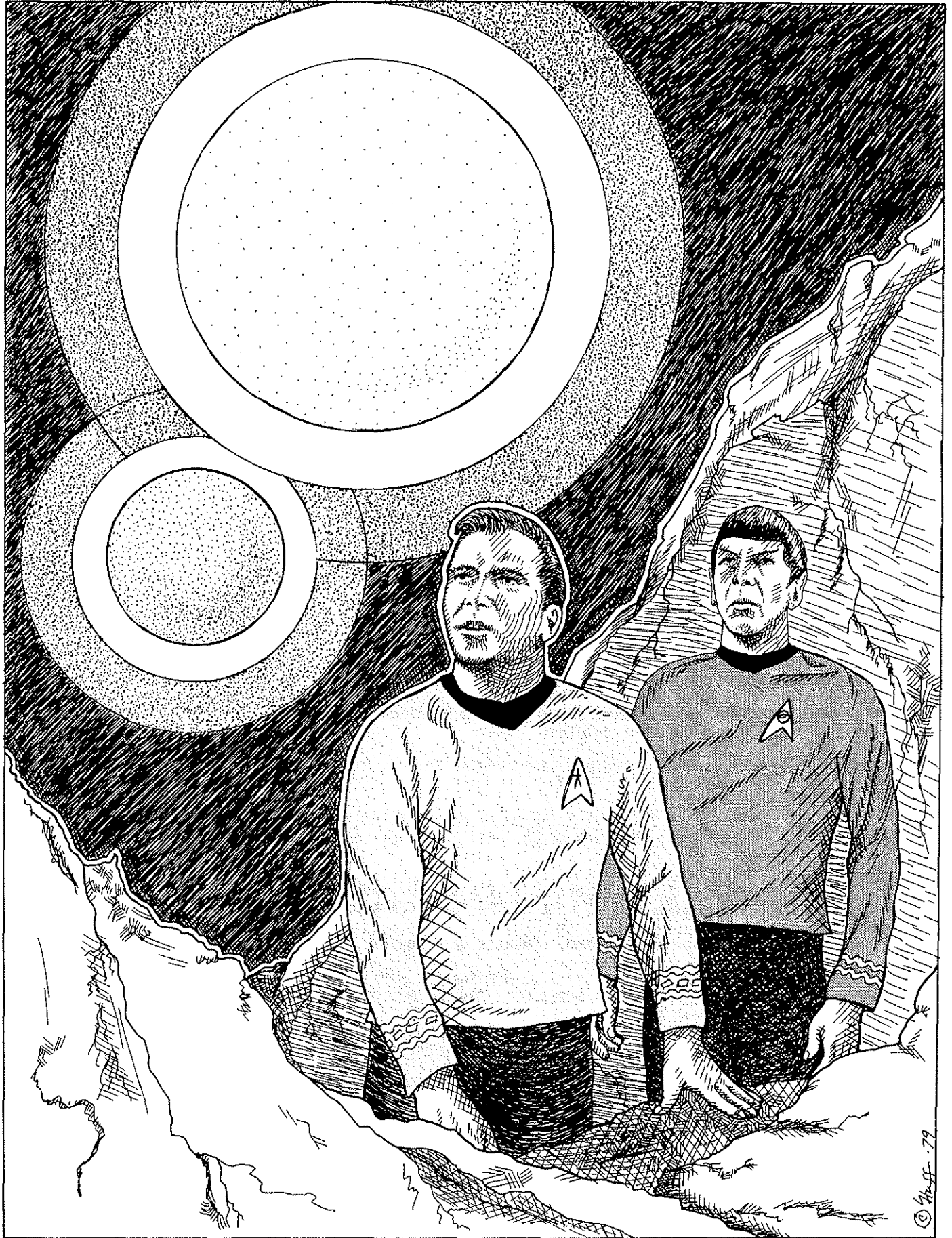
"Wait a minute," Kirk interrupted. "What's going on here?"

The golden one addressed him. *// I... HOW SHALL I SAY? I ENCHANTED THIS ONE. I WILL ADMIT IT. I COULD NOT BEAR TO EXIST IN A WORLD WITH SOMEONE WHO COULD NOT SEE OR UNDERSTAND LOVE.*//

"Why was it so important for this one to learn of love?" Kirk persisted, still confused. "That's an admirable desire, I suppose, but have you enchanted others of your kind?"

// OTHERS?// the deep music rumbled. *// THERE ARE NO OTHERS. ONLY WE TWO.*//

Kirk nodded. "You understand love, then?" he asked, smiling.



The Golden One moved close to the Enchanted. // YES. WE DO INDEED.//

Even Spock appreciated the inflection.

Before anything more could be said, there was a slow, familiar hum. The Starfleet officers turned, and saw McCoy taking form a few meters in the distance. Together, the two entities began to move away.

"Wait a minute!" Kirk called. They turned back.

"I, uh, have just one more question. We still don't know who... what you are. I'm confused." He glanced at Spock, realizing he was about to embarrass them both. "What are you that you could cause us to feel and experience such... beauty?"

The voice of the two beings answered as one, singing a harmony to each other and the wind. *// We are small, insignificant in the scheme of things. What you felt, came from within YOU.//*

McCoy was getting closer. The entities seemed to melt together; they dissolved into a dot of brilliance and disappeared.

"Jim! Spock!" The doctor panted, running up. He knelt beside them, passing his ever-present scanner first over Kirk and then Spock. "I thought I'd find you dead for sure. After this fool Vulcan beamed down without me, something inhibited the sensors and transporter all night. Then, just now, they started working again. It seemed like a miracle that we located you right away."

"Fascinating," Spock marvelled.

"Enchanting, you mean," Kirk quipped.

"What?"

They both looked at McCoy and Kirk smiled into the confused blue eyes. "I'm glad to see you, Bones. I'm not sure we can really explain all this, but can it wait until we beam up and have breakfast? I'm starved."

"Breakfast? Well, I'm not surprised you're hungry. You haven't eaten in two days."

Still somewhat dazed from their experience and very much in rapport, Kirk and Spock were hardly aware of McCoy bustling around them.

"There's still one thing that bothers me," Kirk whispered so low that only Spock could hear.

"Yes, Captain?"

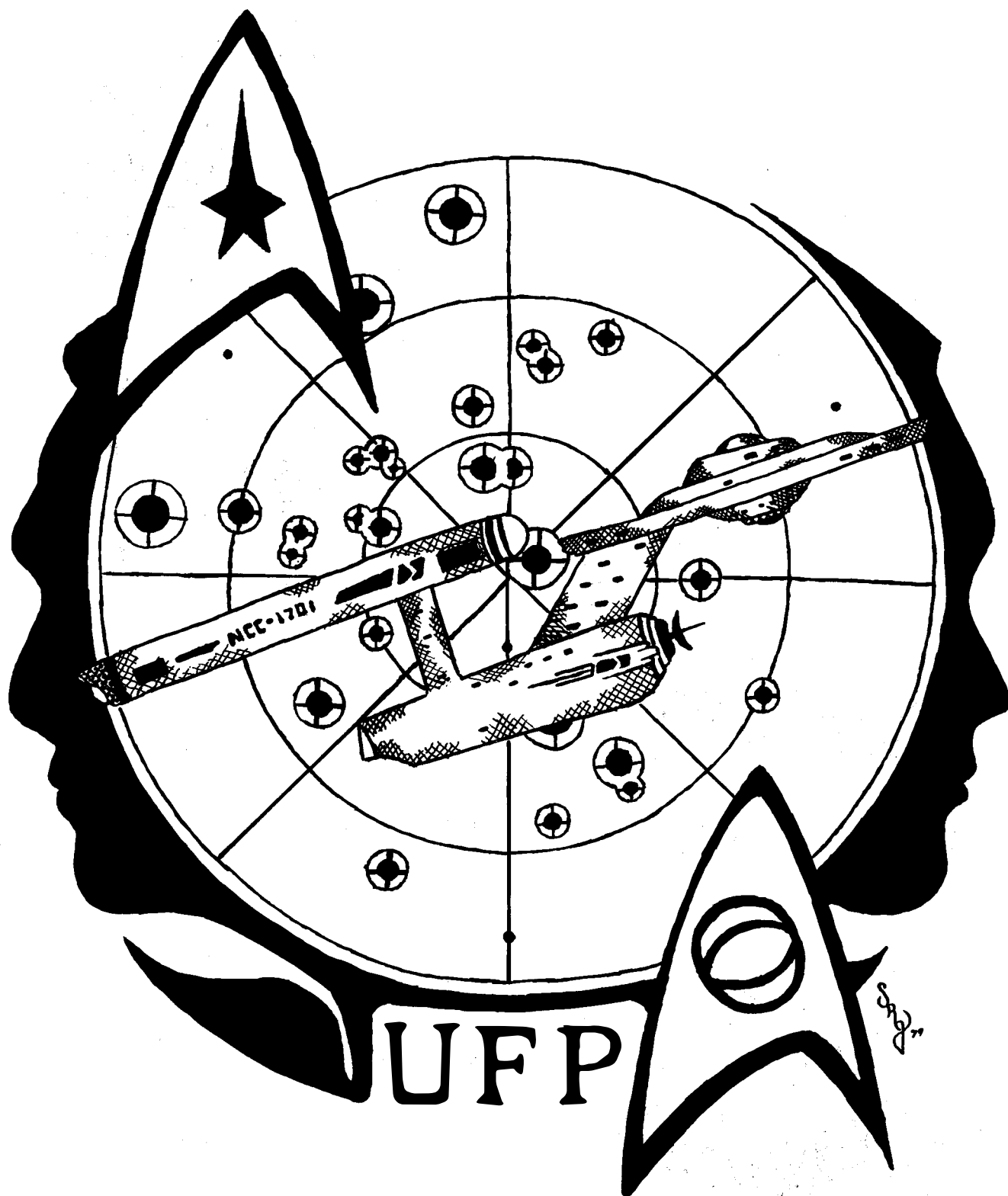
"How do you suppose the golden one knew about love to begin with?"



The Man Beside You

*Fine lines of Logic
Meet with curved lines of emotion.
They intertwine with each other,
Tracing along delicate patterns.
They create a beauty
That stands by itself.
Love is not easy,
The reaching out...
The pain of comfort...
The knowing that you are
The only one in his life.
No one can ever understand
What it is like
To stand alone on the Bridge
Surrounded by loneliness
No one else can understand...
Except the man beside you.*

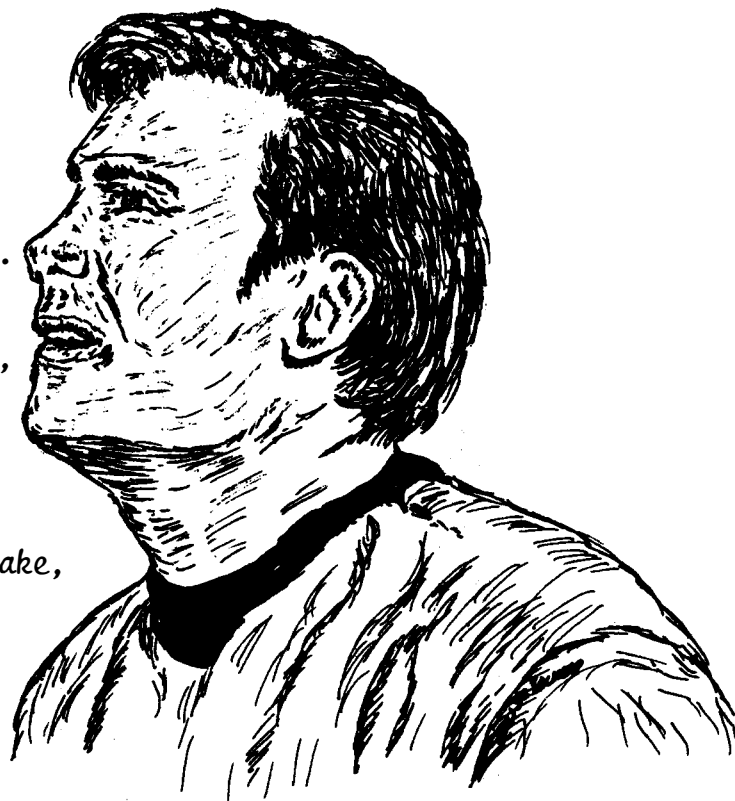
C.F. WOLFORD



Double Image

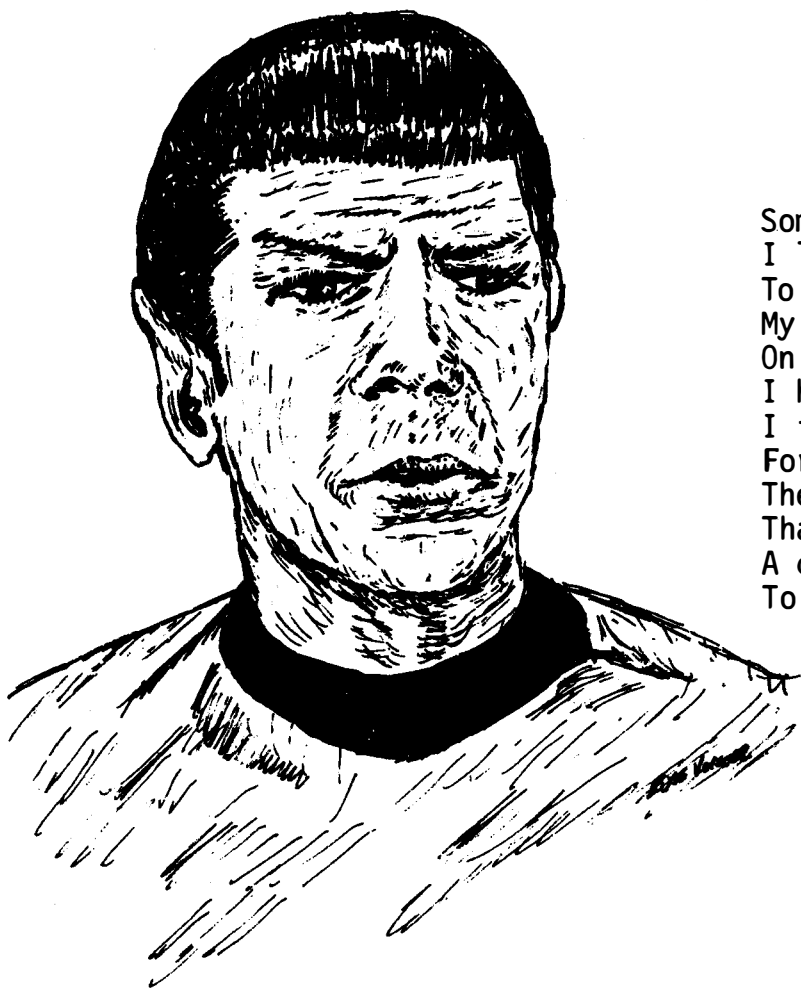
I

When I was young, I used to lie in bed
Just looking at the sky. The starlight gleamed;
I heard the future calling, and it bred
The need to seek the wonderous things I'd dreamed.
How could I bear to leave what was so dear?
That verdant world, the silver, moonlit skies,
The sun-warmed fields, the friendships so sincere,
The gentle laughter in my mother's eyes.
But I desired adventure, and a way
To slip the bonds of Earth that held me fast.
I left my childhood home, my world, to stray
Among those stars, to sail before the mast.
Though smiles and tears were mingled in my wake,
I knew this was the only path to take.



II

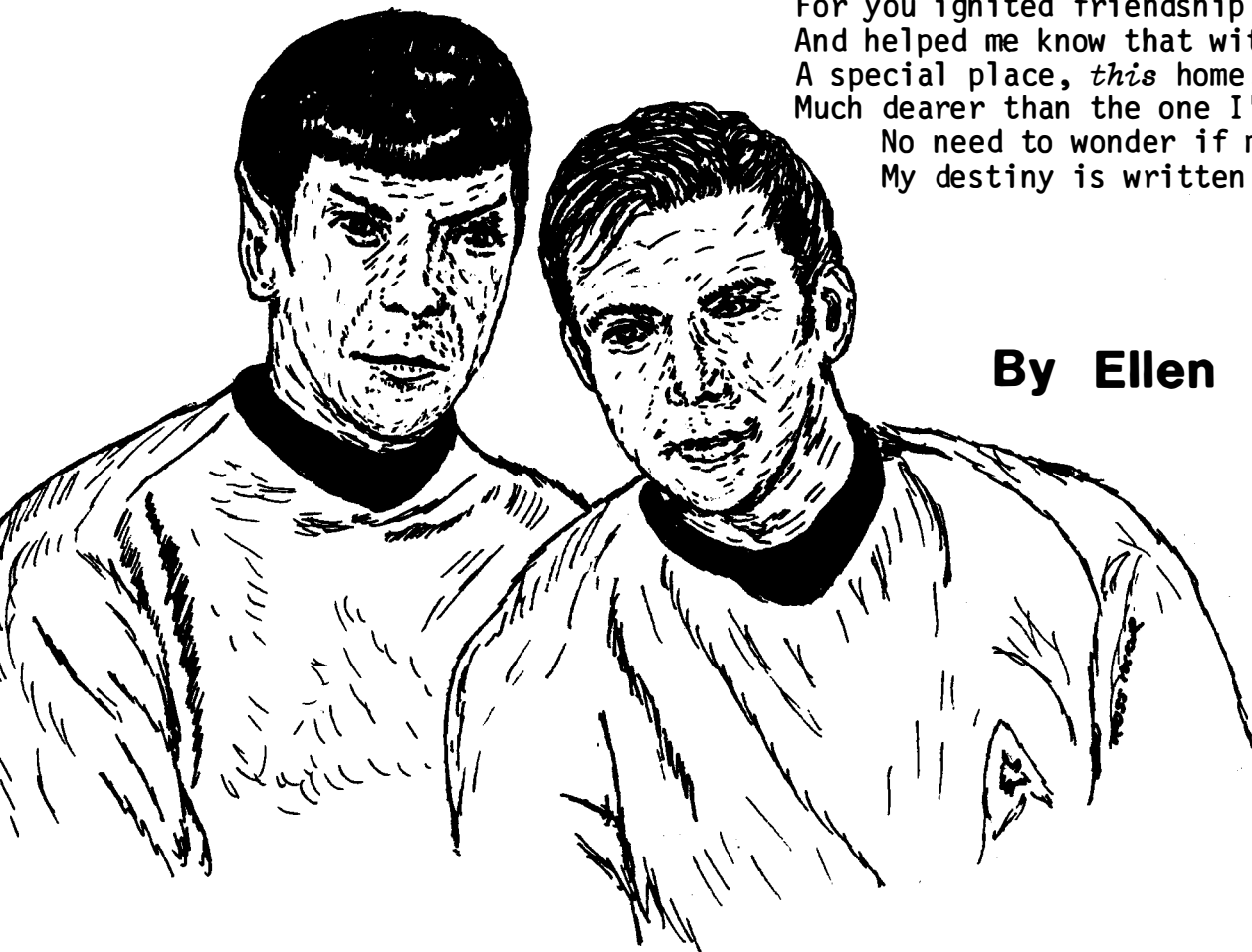
Sometimes, while meditating in the night,
I let my thoughts drift back. I am compelled
To conjure memories: a landscape bright,
My desert world where as a child I dwelled.
On Vulcan sand, beneath red sky that burned,
I had to make a choice, and in the end
I followed logic's path. But still I yearned
For something that I could not comprehend.
The moonless skies of Vulcan lit the spark
That drove me from my father's house to seek
A different way, a chance to leave my mark,
To prove I was unto myself unique.
And so I left that home, with some regret,
Haunted by censure I could not forget.



With pleasure, I discovered that the truth
 Was infinitely more enchanting than
 The best of all the fantasies of youth;
 I kept my sense of wonder as a man.
 I found new loves, new friendships. Then I met
 My Enterprise, my Dulcinea fair,
 Mine to command, to give my life -- and yet
 An emptiness still dwelt in me somewhere.
 When first your eyes returned my smile, my friend,
 I felt that hurtful void within me cease.
 Our special friendship deepened, to transcend
 All joys that came before -- a perfect peace.
 The love you offer is more precious still
 Than anything I've known, or ever will.

IV

I chose the life of interstellar space
 To look for knowledge I would not have found
 Had I remained at home, although the face
 Of Sarek's disapproval held me bound.
 The years moved quickly past; I was alone
 Until the first time that you smiled at me.
 You pierced the steely armor I had grown
 And showed me what myself I could not see.
 For you ignited friendship's fragile flame
 And helped me know that with you I could find
 A special place, *this* home, which soon became
 Much dearer than the one I'd left behind.
 No need to wonder if my choice was wise;
 My destiny is written in your eyes.



By Ellen L. Kobrin

IN YOUR PLACE

BY CRYSTAL TAYLOR

The intercom whistled. "Spock here."

"Transporter room here. The Captain just beamed up and is on his way to his quarters, Mr. Spock."

"Acknowledged." He snapped off the viewscreen and headed toward Kirk's cabin, hoping that shore leave had improved the Captain's mood. Kirk had been annoyed when he had refused to accompany him, and Spock was not looking forward to a repetition of Kirk's displeasure.

Spock paused in front of the door and sighed. He appreciated Kirk's concern that he might feel ignored, but sometimes the Captain's attempts to include him in his activities were nothing but nuisances. It hurt to deny Jim anything, but must 'follow you anywhere' include shore leave when Vulcan and Human needs were different? Rest and relaxation -- why didn't Kirk understand that the only time he could truly relax was when his Captain *was* on shore leave? It was only when Kirk was on some harmless planet -- running up and down on green grass or in some willing woman's arms -- that Spock could trust his Captain's impetuous nature not to lead him into trouble. Spock had learned to accept the Human need of such things, but had never been able to convince Kirk that the only relaxation a Vulcan really needed was the freedom to pursue his projects with a mind unfettered by concern over his Captain's well-being.

Over the years, Spock contemplated, it had become harder to refuse shore leave, as his protest fell repeatedly to Kirk's persuasive tongue and genuine happiness at having him along. It pleased him that Kirk often selected activities that they could do together and at those times, it was impossible to refuse him. Yet there were times, like now, when he had sensed that Kirk really needed certain recreations that were quite illogical for him to participate in -- things the Captain would never do aboard ship -- but persuading him to go alone had been difficult as usual.

He pressed the buzzer. The door slid open at Kirk's command and he stepped inside.

Kirk straightened his shirt as he turned toward the Vulcan. Flashing a grin, he said, "Spock. It's good to see you." His eyes sparkled with a 'come hither, I'll tell you a secret' look.

Realizing that shore leave had had the desired effect on Kirk's previous short temper, he gave the expected response. "I trust you enjoyed yourself, Captain."

Kirk chuckled at the familiar ploy and fell right into it. "Yes, Mr. Spock, I did! You should have come with me. Even a Vulcan would have --- "

The intercom interrupted Kirk's banter, and he reached over to flick the switch with a touch of annoyance.

"Message from Starfleet," Uhura's voice filtered in.

"Pipe it through, Lieutenant." The commonplace words couldn't disguise the excitement in Kirk's voice at the prospect of a new assignment.

The face of Admiral Morell lit up the screen and the officers exchanged greetings. Then the Admiral got down to business. "Captain Kirk, we have rather an unusual assignment for you. You are aware that the Federation has been trying to establish an alliance with the Billihallian Confederation ever since their presence in the galaxy was discovered. Negotiations, however, have been troublesome as the Billihallians have expressed concern over our... quote, fitness to be an ally, unquote. Nevertheless, we have signed a pact with them and both councils are now in the process of setting up a program of mutual exchange in order to acquaint each side with the other's capabilities, attitudes, and character. Starfleet has decided that it would be beneficial to participate in such a cultural program and thus we've agreed to an exchange of Starship Captains for three months. You've drawn that duty, Captain."

Spock's eyebrows shot up immediately in uneasiness. Starfleet couldn't seriously be planning to take Kirk away from the Enterprise. He watched as Kirk shifted uncomfortably in his chair, the smile of anticipation gone from his face. Spock read the small signs that meant the Captain was preparing for a fight, knowing that Kirk would not easily give up his ship to another commander, no matter how adventurous and attractive the assignment seemed to him. No, Jim would not easily trust another to protect and take care of his ship.

With that thought came the realization that argument was essentially useless. Starfleet orders left no latitude for personal choice.

Kirk frowned. "I understand the importance of this alliance, Admiral, but to entrust a starship to a commander who's unfamiliar with her or her crew -- "

"Stow the arguments, Captain!" the Admiral ordered. "I know what you're planning to say. I was a line officer myself, once. I understand your reluctance to part with your ship. But the Federation agreed to this exchange and those are your orders."

Spock glanced at Kirk and saw the anger cloud his eyes. When Kirk spoke again, there was an underlying hardness to his otherwise pleasant words. "Admiral, surely there's another captain better suited for this assignment than I."

An odd smile spread across the Admiral's face and his voice softened into silk. "Actually, it's your own fault you've drawn this duty, Kirk. The Billihallians are a proud, haughty race, and they will settle for nothing less than the best. If the fame of the Enterprise's past exploits and her ability to survive in the face of small odds hadn't preceded her to this corner of the galaxy, the Billihallians wouldn't be familiar with her name." He paused to let that sink in. Coaxingly, he added, "You could say that's one of the reasons the Enterprise was chosen for this assignment."

"Admiral -- "

"Consider this an honor, Captain, and a vote of confidence," Morell suggested. "Actually, it was your own talents that weighted the scale heavily in your favor. Selection of the proper officer for this exchange was no simple matter, I assure you. Starfleet has every confidence that you'll be a credit to the fleet," he added smoothly.

Kirk exchanged a quick look with Spock before replying; the flattery impressed neither of them. "Admiral, surely there's some other way -- "

"Remember the gravity of the situation, Captain!" Morell interrupted impatiently, his voice returning to its no-nonsense tone. "The Federation *needs* this alliance. A show of goodwill to our new friends is vital. Your conduct and that of the Enterprise will be a key factor in the success or failure of this mission. And it's a long way out, so you'll be essentially on your own. Understood?"

Spock could see that Kirk wanted to argue further, but there was a note of finality in the

Admiral's voice that even Kirk recognized.

"Yes, sir," Kirk replied reluctantly.

"Good. Lay in a course for Station X939. Maximum warp. You will rendezvous with the Combala, commanded by Captain Lihallot. You'll receive further instructions once you reach your destination. The Enterprise is temporarily assigned to the quadrant adjacent to the Billihallian space."

The screen went blank. Kirk punched the cut-off switch with his fist. "Remind me not to have so many successful missions, Spock."

"Of course, Captain, but the alternative to that is -- "

"Never mind," Kirk groaned. "Just give me a chance to think!"

Spock fell silent. The possible implications of Kirk commanding an alien ship did not please him. Spock had no doubt that Kirk would have no trouble with authority; his bearing alone made others want to follow him. But no one could predict what problems the alien vessel might encounter. That the Billihallian starships were as capable of handling unexpected situations as the Enterprise herself did not lessen his uneasiness. What really worried him was that impetuous nature which allowed Jim to race headlong into danger, relying only on his own abilities to pull himself out of any scrapes into which he might fall. Spock worried about that attitude which said: I won't order a man to do what I'm not willing to do myself. He knew that an unfamiliar crew would make Kirk feel even more obligated to place himself at the head of any action to prove himself as a leader. And then what? Who would protect Jim against himself?

Spock became aware of Kirk watching him. The anger in the hazel eyes had been replaced by a warm understanding glow that told Spock that Kirk was reading his fears. The Vulcan consciously strove to suppress all outward signs of his feelings. Now was not the time to lose control, he reminded himself. His friend needed support, not additional burdens.

"I don't like this assignment either, Spock," he said softly, finding some comfort in his companion's concern, "but since we've no choice, we must make the best of it."

Spock nodded but didn't answer.

"You may enjoy it, Spock," Kirk teased, trying to ease the building tension. "I hear they're a lot like your own people. You may even get a captain who's as devoted to logic as you are. Wouldn't that be a pleasant change for you?"

Spock didn't respond. He knew what Kirk was trying to do, but he felt the situation was inherently too perilous to be dismissed with merriment.

"Give you a new chess partner, at least -- maybe you'll pick up a few new tactics to use when I return." The fleeting look of pain in Spock's eyes prompted Kirk to add softly, "I know this isn't going to be easy on you, Spock." Despite his efforts at reassurance, Kirk's own eyes mirrored the same misgivings.

It was clear the Captain wanted to say more, but feared to embarrass both of them.

"Jim..."

Ignoring the vulnerable look in the dark eyes, Kirk hurriedly interjected, "I'm counting on you, Spock. Knowing you'll be here to help the new captain will make it easier for me."

It was impossible not to respond to Kirk's confidence and the familiar ground provided Spock with a comfortable answer. "Indeed, Captain, it would be logical to help him all I can." Determined not to complicate Kirk's problems with worry, Spock buried his doubts under the non-committal mask that often helped him in difficult situations. He knew that it wouldn't fool Kirk, but the Captain would accept the gesture for what it was.

"Yes, I know that."

Easy words. Familiar words. However, no words could still the Vulcan's apprehension or quiet the Captain's hesitancy.

Spock watched as Kirk slowly looked around his quarters and contemplated what that look meant.

"We've a good ship, Spock," Kirk continued. "I know I can trust you to see that nothing happens to her."

The slight edge in Kirk's voice quietly conveyed the importance of his ship. The Enterprise was in Kirk's blood, Spock knew, and it wouldn't be easy for him to let go -- to allow another to assume responsibility for ship and crew. He could empathize with his Captain, for he, too, would find it difficult to leave the Enterprise now that Jim...

Spock silently met Kirk's searching gaze. Kirk was obviously aware they were skirting the real issue, obviously aware of his thoughts, but nevertheless reluctant to voice anything that might cause mutual embarrassment. Kirk's eyes silently asked him if he'd be all right.

Spock didn't know how to answer him. There were so many things he wanted to say and yet there were no words to express them. He had never wished for anything as hard as he now wished to accompany Kirk.

Kirk nodded, understanding, as he said gently, "I know, Spock. Don't worry about me. I'll be all right."

Unfortunately, the words meant to comfort did nothing to ease Spock's mind. His skepticism must have shown because Kirk added with a grin, "I promise not to do anything foolish," patted him on the arm, and then quickly changed the subject. "C'mon, Spock. We needn't worry about it until it happens. Let's go to the bridge before the crew discovers they can do without us."

"That is highly unlikely," Spock commented as they left Kirk's cabin. "Especially in your case."

Kirk's appreciative smile dispelled the anxiety within the two men. By the time the turbo-lift answered the Captain's signal, their minds had turned to routine matters.

* * *

The Combala was already locked into orbit when the Enterprise arrived at the Federation outpost. Kirk and Spock beamed down to meet the Billihallian officers and start the conference that would end in the exchange. Aboard ship, the final preparations were made to ensure that the new Captain would be unable to learn any more about Federation technology than Starfleet desired. It was a small concession to the enormous risks that loomed in military eyes, but Starfleet recognized how vital this alliance was and what gambles both sides were taking to ensure its success.

Finally the day of transfer arrived. Kirk and Spock headed for the transporter room. Upon entering, they found the other senior officers waiting for them.

Kirk knew that nothing would stop McCoy from seeing him off, and even Scott had insisted on working the transporter himself. He felt grateful that he had such friends.

He turned to his Chief Engineer and saw the misery written in his face. "Ready, Scotty?" he asked gently.

"Captain -- "

"I know, Scotty," Kirk soothed. "It's only three months. I'll be back before you know I'm gone."

Scott nodded, understanding how Kirk wanted to play the scene. "Aye, Captain, I'm ready."

Kirk smiled and turned away. He scanned the room slowly with a reluctance he'd never felt before and tried hard to hide his feelings in front of his senior officers. If only he could... He caught McCoy's eyes and saw his own feelings mirrored there. The doctor moved up and placed a hand on his shoulder.

"Take care of yourself, Jim. I don't want to make any house calls."

Kirk grinned in spite of himself. "Don't worry, I will. Just don't give my replacement as rough a time as you do me, or Starfleet will have my neck when I return."

"Who, me?" McCoy replied, feigning innocence.

"Yes, you, Doctor," Kirk maintained lightly.

"I never give anyone a hard time," McCoy protested. Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed Spock and purred, "as long as they don't give us a captain that acts like a computer."

Kirk shook his head beseechingly and turned to Spock as he said, "I don't think you need worry about that, Bones." He locked gazes with his First Officer, knowing that this was the hardest goodbye of all. He could see the worry behind the set expression and read the silent pleading to be careful and not take foolish chances. He tried to put all his feelings of comfort and reassurance into his own eyes, but he said only, "Take care of my ship, Spock."

Spock nodded and offered just a hint of a smile. "Good luck, Captain." He then moved back to stand near the console as Kirk stepped onto the platform.

"Energize!" Kirk ordered.

Spock watched as the golden shimmers appeared and Kirk faded from sight. As if each willed himself to carry the image of the other with him, their eyes remained locked together in a mutual promise.

Spock stared at the empty platform until he managed to get his feelings under control. He glanced at the others who continued to stare at the chamber, whether out of their own sense of loss or respect for his privacy he did not know. But he did know that now was not the time for such reverie. There would be time later... when he was alone.

Spock swallowed and activated the controls.

They waited in silence as a tall thin humanoid materialized and stepped off the platform. He was virtually indistinguishable from the Humans in front of him, except that his skin was a shade brighter red than was usually found on Earth, giving the appearance of permanent sunburn. Both Spock and McCoy could have listed the differences between the races, but none of that was important now. What set him apart from those who stood before him was the haughty carriage and piercing eyes that spoke of a warrior race capable of forging its own way in the universe and recognizing no obstacles. From what Spock knew of their culture, their temperments seemed more closely allied to the Romulans than his own people, but so far they had shown no desire to become enemies.

Spock formally welcomed the Billihallian, introduced the others, and then guided the new commander to the bridge. He accompanied Captain Lihallot around each station, introducing him to the crew on duty and familiarizing him with the function of each post. When Lihallot settled into the command chair, Spock returned to his own station, suppressing the peculiar discomfort he felt at the sight of a stranger in Kirk's chair. He busied himself with recalibrating his sensors as the ship explored deeper into the unknown area.

Glancing from Uhura, around engineering, to Sulu and Chekov at the helm, he realized that his own uneasiness was echoed in the attention everyone gave to their duties. They clung to routine -- trying to ignore the absence of the one not there. Most likely Lihallot noticed nothing but the efficiency with which the crew performed, although everyone else was aware of the difference.

Spock didn't analyze why this exchange should have such a pronounced effect on the bridge crew, since Kirk was frequently gone -- on landing parties, special missions, and such. He did not consider that their feelings for Kirk would be coupled with a superstitious foreboding that this one alteration in their usual habits would have a frightening difference in their lives. After all, one of them had always commanded in lieu of the Captain; one of them had held things together until he returned. It was as if, present or not, his spirit was always with them, looking over their shoulders and whispering what he'd want done. This time Lihallot was in charge and the invisible link was broken.

Nevertheless, Spock understood that some action was necessary and found himself even wishing for the presence of McCoy to ease some of the tension. However, he knew with certainty that the doctor would spend little time on the bridge. Without Kirk, there was no center around which they could all gather.

Spock walked to Uhura's station under the pretense of checking some data. She looked up at him and smiled wistfully. He cocked an eyebrow at her and moved on.

He inspected the engineering boards long enough for Scott to acknowledge his presence, then glanced over at life support before wandering down to the helm. Chekov's nod was accompanied by Sulu's grin, and he nodded to each in turn after inspecting their boards.

He returned to his station without looking at the con and drew satisfaction from the more relaxed atmosphere. A simple act, but it imparted a sense of familiarity and solidarity without admitting the need for such reassurance. It was a promise of a unified front and he had felt their gratitude in return.

Spock wondered briefly if Lihallot also felt unsettled by unfamiliarity. Did he miss his crew as much as this one missed Kirk? He inhaled deeply. What was that phrase Jim was fond of using? *It's been a long day...* Spock suspected that that phrase might well describe quite a few of the coming days before Kirk returned home. With resolution, he turned his attention to the computer and occupied himself with his own duties.

The end of the shift came with an almost tangible sigh of relief. Personnel were exchanged and briefed with the quickness of a storm about to break. Never before had there been such eagerness to leave the bridge.

Lihallot excused himself and headed toward his assigned quarters. Spock felt obligated to accompany the bridge crew to dinner although his need for quiet contemplation was greater than his hunger. He knew that the absence of Kirk's lively conversation and friendly interaction would be felt most keenly here, and he accepted the responsibility of filling the void with the same understanding that had motivated his actions earlier. He realized that it was up to him to provide the sense of continuity the crew demanded. Kirk would expect it and he was determined not to fail.

But soon, Spock admitted defeat. His arrival was greeted with feeble attempts at humor, and then silence. Every discussion he started was met with listless response. Aware of the gap he had never known completely how to bridge, Spock was suddenly lonely. The furtive glances in his direction increased his discomfort. When caught, the eyes would dart away in embarrassment.

The questions in their eyes burned into him: Did Spock miss the Captain? Why did he seem so calm? Was one captain really the same as another to a Vulcan? How could Spock work so efficiently when no one knew how the Captain was doing?

Spock consumed his meal as silently as the others.

Depression settled over the table as everyone sought to end the meal quickly. No one wanted to prolong the evening, so goodbyes were short and dispersal quick. Spock escaped gratefully to the observation deck -- away from the prying eyes that seemed determined to dissect his soul.

Spock understood that it was only their own pain that caused them to wonder about him, but their constant curiosity was unsettling. The strain of maintaining a pose of indifference was sapping his strength, but if he yielded, how would the crew be affected? He desperately needed the equanimity that meditation would restore.

Soon, Spock reluctantly admitted that he had chosen a poor place to meditate. Although it was a frequent retreat of his, tonight it reminded him that Kirk also came here to soothe his tensions. The only difference was that Kirk would spend his time contemplating the stars.

Spock studied the stars that moved quietly above him. Velvety blackness and diamond dust, Jim had often described it. He wondered where Kirk was and what he was doing. Spock was unable to suppress the ache that suddenly gripped him.

Inhaling deeply, Spock willed his emotions back under control. *Meditation*, he reminded himself. *That is why you came here. Replenish the will that pretends none of this matters.*

His emotions wouldn't obey him as a myriad of images assaulted his consciousness... lips that curled slightly into a smile and broke suddenly into laughter... a curl falling defiantly across a forehead creased with concern... sparkling eyes that gleamed in amusement or clouded with compassion... a hand that grasped his own shoulder protectively... a voice that whispered: *We'll tackle this together, Spock...*

... Except that this time they were not together, working in unison. Spock told himself that it wasn't that he distrusted Kirk's ability to handle situations; it was the recklessness that was also Kirk's strength that frightened him. It was one thing to gamble on their teamwork because such a chance would be based on knowledge of how much in tune they were. One knew exactly what to expect from the other. It was another matter to bet on unknown quantities. Would Kirk have the same affinity with his new crew? What if Kirk needed him? Help by long distance was impossible.

Separated by expanses that made communication unreasonable, Spock was reminded of the insignificance of the men who explored the universe in comparison to its vastness. No matter how important their mission was within the microcosm of their ship and even their Federation, life and death meant nothing to the cosmos itself. Space was indifferent to friendship and to all the little things that made one man care about another.

The stars that had glowed brightly with beauty only a moment before, now seemed cold and empty as worry clouded the pleasant images with menacing visions: the memories of times when Kirk had been wounded and needed his help... eyes closed tight in pain... lips white with agony... an arm pressed tight against a curled abdomen, reddened with blood... the times he had carried his bloodied Captain to safety, unconscious in his arms... the red stains on command gold...

Spock shut his eyes hard. *Think of the ship, he commanded. Yes, duty. The ship.*

"Can you feel her heartbeat, Spock? The power that surges within her? She sings for me, Spock. She's mine..."

The thoughts were insidious and impossible to block. Spock grabbed at the wall to steady himself as he wrenched his mind out of the well into which it had fallen. He would accomplish nothing if he remained here.

He turned to leave and saw that McCoy was standing just inside the door. *For how long?* he wondered, and tensed as the doctor approached him. McCoy could often understand him better than Spock cared to acknowledge and that made the Vulcan wary.

"It hurts, Spock, doesn't it?" McCoy drawled, knowing full well that the Vulcan would never admit it.

Spock raised one eyebrow in response and attempted to pass him. McCoy grabbed his arm and pleaded, "I miss him, too. Couldn't we talk about it?"

Spock stared down at his arm but made no attempt to shrug off the doctor's hand. "How would that help either of us?" he inquired evenly.

"It does help, Spock!" McCoy insisted. His blue eyes studied the tense form a moment, quickly assessing the levels of stress he read. "At least it would help me."

Spock raised his head to meet McCoy's gaze. For an instant, the dark eyes softened slightly, as if hovering on the brink of trust. Then the vulnerable expression was gone. Spock recognized that the doctor was as concerned as he was and suffered as well, but some things were difficult to share. He nodded toward the starfield.

"Perhaps you could find your answers in the stars, Doctor," he suggested. "I can offer little more."

McCoy caught the hint and nodded. But he was determined to lend some comfort to his friend even if Spock remained pure Vulcan. "Will you keep me company for a while?" he asked. "I don't want to be alone."

Spock sat down next to McCoy without further objection, but his eyes warned the doctor to silence.

McCoy was content to let their shared presence be the balm they both needed and offered no further intrusion. When McCoy's eyes shifted to the starfield, Spock relaxed slightly. There were some areas that only Kirk was permitted to enter.

* * *

Kirk wandered aimlessly down the corridors of the Combala, through the partially deserted engineering decks, and past the science labs. He had been given a formal tour when he'd come aboard, but he preferred to explore on his own... the best way to get the feel of a ship, he believed.

Besides, he had little else to do with his off-duty hours; his temporary quarters still seemed too strange to feel like home, even if it had been in his nature to lock himself away from the crew. Unfortunately, his early attempts to become better acquainted with his new officers had met with failure. The bridge had been a scene of quiet efficiency, but when he had tried to indicate his confidence in them, his friendly overtures had encountered hesitation and confusion. Acutely aware that they had little reason to trust him in the way he felt was necessary, Kirk tried to stem his impatience and had remained in his chair for the rest of the shift, projecting what he hoped was a proper command image.

He had tried again, later, when he had headed for what had been designated as the officers' recreation room. The noise in the room had disappeared on his entrance, as everyone quickly straightened in their chairs in what appeared to be quiet attention. He'd tried to put his officers at ease, but only succeeded in creating more discomfort. Uneasiness he could understand, but he had the distinct impression something else was operating here -- it was almost as if he were breaking protocol by his actions...

He had shrugged off these curious sensations with the reminder that this was only the first day and the crew was probably only experiencing the effects of the exchange. Given time, he consoled himself, he was certain to win the confidence and loyalty so necessary to command.

Having thus convinced himself that tomorrow would be better, he had left them to cope with their loss in their own way because, whether or not they missed their Captain as much as he missed the Enterprise, one thing was certain: his continued presence wouldn't restore the relaxed atmosphere that had prevailed before his arrival.

As Kirk entered the Combala's observation deck, he mused how cold and empty the bridge had seemed today without the quizzical dark eyes sharing special moments and conveying wordless messages... without the amused tilt of an eyebrow responding to his teasing...

He recalled how quiet it had been without the hearty laughter he often shared with his crew after some mischief, relieving tension, anxiety, or boredom...

In the solitude he found on the observation deck, Kirk admitted just how much he'd come to rely on Spock's companionship. He already missed the all-too-brief hours spent in chess or quiet conversation. He smiled as an image came to mind -- Spock... always waiting... always there... helping... supporting... never too busy whenever 'his Captain' was feeling restless...

And Bones -- who could always be counted on to have a little something to relax weary muscles... to give a comforting word when it was needed... or a kick when it was justified...

When had he grown used to all the attention?

He compared the earlier encounter to the jovial evenings spent listening to Uhura sing in the recreation room or the pretended verbal battles his friends were apt to stage for his benefit. His sudden loneliness reminded him how long it had been since he had felt alone on the Enterprise. It was not that he'd been unaware of his friends' importance before this, but their absence made a difference that had nothing to do with the passage of time.

The feeling of estrangement from all he knew and loved brought home the realization that it was his crew that gave life to his ship -- it was his crew that made her a living, breathing entity to him.

Kirk gazed up at the canopy of stars and felt some of the tension drain away. Some things never change, he thought. The beauty of space was alluring no matter where you were... the stars beckoned no matter how far from home...

* * *

Kirk fidgeted in his command chair, wishing there was some way to make the ship travel faster. The distress call which indicated that one of the Billihallian outposts was under attack had been

received over an hour ago and even at maximum warp, the Combala was too far away to ascertain what was happening.

Kirk didn't like the station's subsequent silence. Perhaps only communications had been wiped out, he told himself, but the same intuition that brought his body to full alert and sharpened his senses also told him that this was more serious.

His fears were confirmed when the ship came into scanning range of the planetoid. He tried to hide his impatience when his officers relayed information on the destruction but could give him no details on how that destruction had been accomplished in such a short time or what weapon had been used. All they could say was that they had never encountered anything like it before. Kirk sighed at the number of times in his life he had heard those same words. Worst of all, the attacker had disappeared without leaving a discernible trail.

Kirk walked over to the science station. "Any survivors?"

"None that our sensors can detect. However, residual energy emanations are distorting our readings. Until we can identify the nature of the weapon the enemy used and eliminate this interference, information gathered will not be conclusive."

"In other words, a landing party is necessary. Set one up."

Gerriot nodded and reached for the intercom, until stopped by Kirk's next words. "You have the con. I'll meet them in the transporter room in ten minutes."

Kirk strode toward the turbolift, unaware that the Science Officer stood motionless, staring after him. He didn't see that activity had ceased on the bridge while all eyes watched him leave.

He did note the surprise on the faces of the group assembled in the transporter room. There was an awkward moment of silence until Kirk realized what was so unusual about his appearance. He wondered why some people didn't understand that there was only one real way to ever get a 'feel for what was happening' and that was to be there. In this case, he had to know his enemy and what he was up against.

In no mood for the familiar question of what he was doing there, Kirk stated flatly, "I plan to see for myself what happened down there." In Kirk's voice there was the unmistakable ring of authority that denied debate and it was underscored by the resoluteness with which he stepped onto the platform. The others scrambled quickly and quietly onto the pads, seconds before he gave the order to energize.

Whatever objections may have been raised upon materialization were lost in the sight that greeted them. Smouldering wreckage surrounded them on all sides, glowing with a strange light that hurt their eyes. Fires still burned in places. The sound of rumbling let them know that structures were still crumbling. They walked carefully over pitted ground, trying to skirt the glowing metal. Everywhere they looked there were bodies burned beyond recognition protruding from the debris, twisted into distorted shapes by fallen beams or jagged metallic pieces.

Then there were the bodies which were recognizable: men, women, children. Kirk felt his stomach tighten as it always did when he was forced to view the needless waste of living beings. No matter how often he faced death, he never grew used to it. How could any civilization capable of space flight condone wholesale massacre? Cold anger began to burn in him. He divided up the group and started the search for answers.

As Kirk headed toward a building that was partially standing, trying to guess its use from the remains, his communicator beeped. He flipped it open. "Kirk here."

"We are picking up readings in the building in front of us. There appear to be survivors inside but the structure is too unstable to enter."

"On my way. Kirk out."

As he approached the group, he could see what they meant. There was a gutted building inside a ravaged compound. The surrounding courtyard walls were mostly rubble and the building itself glowed with the same peculiar light. In the front, the roof balanced precariously on half-torn out walls. Floors between levels ended in empty spaces as the walls they butted against lay crumbled at ground level. It looked like only a light breeze would be needed to bring it down.

While they stood there, they could hear crashes that indicated the unsteadiness inside. Kirk agreed that it wasn't the safest place to investigate, yet he couldn't understand their hesitation. Turning to his men, he asked, "You say there are survivors in there?"

"Yes, but it's too risky to send men in there. The building could collapse any minute."

"Any other bright ideas on how to get them out? C'mon, let's go."

A phaser whine ended the discussion. Automatically, the group scattered, diving individually for cover as the blast burned the ground where they'd been standing.

Before the Billihallians could return fire, Kirk yelled at them to hold back. An unlucky shot might crumble the whole structure.

"They're shooting at us," the lieutenant crouching next to him protested.

"After what they've been through, can you blame them? They probably think we're the enemy." He began to shout loud enough for all to hear: "Spread out. Try to get close enough to talk to them. Explain who we are. Don't fire at them unless you have to. The whole building might..."

He was interrupted by another phaser outburst, this one coming close enough to scatter debris in his face as he flattened himself against the broken wall protecting him.

"You can't be serious," the same lieutenant complained as he sat up. He peered around the edge of the stones, swinging his phaser but seeing nothing.

This time Kirk didn't even try to disguise his annoyance. "They're your own people. Scared. Maybe in pain. You can't just kill them."

The lieutenant turned back to stare at Kirk, his face expressionless. Kirk took his silence as assent and continued, "I'm going to try to get behind them. Maybe then we can disarm them and stop this. Are you with me?"

Kirk couldn't read the odd expression that flickered through the young man's eyes but forgot about it when the lieutenant nodded in agreement. "Good. You take the left. I'll take the right. Everyone move out."

The terrain wasn't easy to run across, but the rubble did offer some protection against being a target. Once inside the building, the going was just as rough. Kirk had to climb over some debris and crawl under fallen beams, taking care not to bring the building down upon him or attract attention to himself.

He wondered whether the lieutenant was in the building yet. The reluctance the Billihallian had shown made Kirk question whether the man had even followed him or whether he was grandstanding this play alone. He wished that he had someone familiar with him -- someone he could count on as backup. If Spock were here now, for example, he could probably predict just where his Vulcan would be by this time.

As he approached the room from which the shooting was coming, he could hear the shouts of his men and realized that no one was buying their claims of friendship. Fear must be driving all rational thoughts from their heads, Kirk told himself. Belatedly, he realized that he might not be taken for a friend himself -- he certainly couldn't pass himself off as a countryman. Perhaps this was one job he should have let the men handle on their own, except that he seemed to be the only one who cared if these people lived or died. *Too harsh a judgement, Kirk*, he chastised himself. Still, he promised himself that the next time he wouldn't be so quick to do it himself, for there was a certain illogic to his current predicament.

He crept around the corner and saw them. Hurriedly, he sought cover and looked around for the lieutenant. He seemed to be alone except for the men frantically firing. There were three in his line of vision, but he could hear others. He couldn't stun them all in one blast.

Kirk yelled, "Drop your weapons. You're surrounded." He aimed a shot to fall short of them, letting them know he meant business.

All motion stopped. For a moment it looked like it would work, but then a sound behind Kirk distracted him. A man screamed and shot wildly in Kirk's direction. The beam hit the ceiling,

causing the hanging beams to come crashing down. Kirk flung himself out of the path, a second late. He never saw what hit him.

When he regained consciousness, he saw a face outlined against the sky and knew he was outside. Brushing away the hands of the medic and ignoring his protest, Kirk sat up. His head ached from the motion and his vision blurred. He took deep breaths until the pain subsided and then glanced around. One medic was trying to calm an hysterical woman. A child was crying in the arms of one of the landing party. A man was being patched up. The rest seemed involved in conversation with their rescuers.

Kirk caught the eye of his lieutenant and motioned him over. "Did you get them all out?"

"Yes, sir. No casualties," he answered, respect clear in his eyes.

"Good," Kirk replied. "And thanks."

The young officer seemed confused. "For what?"

Kirk smiled. "For backing me up, what else?"

"Just doing my duty, sir." He extended his hand to help Kirk to rise.

"Yes, I know." Kirk stopped talking as he stood. The world blurred again as his head protested his activity. He swayed slightly and felt the hand of the medic steady him.

"You should rest, Captain. It was a bad blow."

"We can take care of everything here, Captain," the lieutenant added.

Kirk nodded and offered no further resistance. He was only too glad to sit quietly until they all beamed aboard.

* * *

The shift had long ended before Spock abandoned the computer for dinner. Wishing to avoid a repetition of yesterday's dinner fiasco, he had worked long into the next period, as he had once done habitually before a certain young captain had come along with other ideas of how he should spend his off-duty hours. Not that Spock verbalized this to himself; he didn't need to analyze why he sought refuge in his research. It was sufficient to know that logically he shouldn't waste any available moment: his interests were always more numerous than his limited spare time could handle. Although he didn't admit to himself that such scientific pursuits provided a much-needed buffer against what would otherwise be empty hours, he did have a sense of coming full circle that reinforced the void he felt inside.

As expected, the recreation room was empty of well-known faces. He suspected that everyone had turned in early after what must have been an exhausting and frustrating day.

Early in the shift, the Enterprise had come across an asteroid belt in the course of routine star-mapping. Lihallot had decided to use this opportunity to test the capabilities of the Federation starship. He had ordered a series of maneuvers that Spock deemed a waste of time and energy. Yet the crew had reacted to the demanded demonstration as if they'd been challenged to prove their worth. The mounting resentment against Lihallot's little-concealed arrogance made the crew determined to show him his error.

In running Lihallot's proposed gauntlet so smoothly, Sulu had displayed brilliant piloting. Under his deft hands, the Enterprise had twisted and curved, dived and soared, feinted and pivoted through the abrupt course changes until Lihallot had finally called a halt to the exercise.

Spock had noted the smile of satisfaction the helmsman flashed to Scott at the end of the run, and he had understood the answering gleam in the Scotsman's eyes. The Vulcan was inclined to agree with them. It would be difficult to envision a Billihallian ship performing better than the Enterprise had done today. In fact, the ship had responded as if she herself had been conscious of the challenge and the resulting surge of pride within her -- as if she herself had been determined not to let her crew down.

Spock recalled the excitement on the bridge as everyone had been pleased with the ship's performance. The Enterprise's reputation had not been created in a vacuum; her crew was well aware of it and worked hard to earn it. Therefore, it was not surprising to Spock that they had known that today's executions were impressive and deserving of that reputation.

But if they had expected a word of praise or even acknowledgement from the Billihallian, they were soon disappointed. His only comment had been to choose several targets to test the phasers and photon torpedoes. He demanded pinpoint accuracy, then said nothing when Chekov gave it to him. In the end, he had ordered them to return to their routine duties with no indication of how well they had done.

Spock realized that the alien's oversight had been consequential. Jim Kirk always gave credit where it was due, and his crew was used to praise for excellence and superior performance. The lack of what they considered their due had drastically altered the mood for the rest of the shift.

It also led Spock to contemplate what kind of crew Jim Kirk was handling at that moment. His thoughts were cut short by: "May I join you?"

Spock looked up to see Lihallot standing over him, holding a tray. He nodded and watched as the man seated himself.

"There is so little time to learn about your Federation and much I don't understand."

"Perhaps if you did not isolate yourself from the crew so much, you would find your answers, sir," Spock offered. "Captain Kirk often suggests that the best way to learn about the Federation is through its representatives -- his crew."

Lihallot raised a skeptical eyebrow. "Command necessitates isolation, Mr. Spock."

Although quite familiar with the loneliness of command, Spock detected a harshness in the alien's voice that he wished to explore. "In what way?"

"Surely you understand that friendship with subordinates has a deleterious effect on discipline," Lihallot replied haughtily. "It softens the iron hand that must be maintained if respect is to be upheld."

Spock gazed thoughtfully at Lihallot as he reviewed his knowledge of the alien's homeland. Like most warrior states, Billihallia tended to be more autocratic than most Federation worlds, but did this mean that the individual was sacrificed for the needs of society? What was the worth of the individual in their society? Was he expendable? Were their starships viewed also as ambassadors of peace -- for exploration and contact -- or only as exhibitions of military might -- to convince new worlds to join their Confederation? There had been no reports of enslavement among their satellite worlds.

"It is the abilities of the man in command that generates respect. Autocracy does not guarantee respect," Spock remarked. "It only ensures that orders will be obeyed. Discipline does not demand a sacrifice of personal involvement. In fact, I would suggest the latter enhances discipline by promoting a cohesiveness that enables a crew to function smoothly and efficiently -- as demonstrated by ours, today."

"Yes, a most curious reaction occurred today when I put the ship through standard maneuvers. The exercise seemed to disturb your men. Could you explain why?"

Spock steepled his hands in front of him. Explaining Human motivations to an alien was not a position with which he was comfortable -- especially when the alien's words echoed through his mind with disturbing familiarity. "It is customary for the Captain to comment on the crew's performance when such a demonstration is requested."

Lihallot seemed surprised. "The crew performed as expected. Commentary would serve no purpose. Flattery would not increase efficiency."

"On the contrary, sir, appreciation give impetus to the desire to excel and boosts morale at the same time."

"They did their duty, no more."

"Nevertheless, I have noticed that human nature responds to voiced approval in many beneficial ways. Besides establishing a rapport and loyalty to a captain who recognizes the worth of his crew, such reassurances show the crew that the captain has confidence in their abilities and certain expectations regarding their future performances. Often this will inspire the crew to extraordinary actions in times of emergency in order to justify that confidence."

"One does what needs to be done," Lihallot insisted. "Surely your crew recognizes the necessity of top efficiency without needing to be smug about it. Your protests to the contrary seem out of place. You, as a Vulcan, should understand what I'm saying. Your culture is founded on the precepts of logic, I'm told."

"Yes, Vulcans base their lives on logic, but they recognize that the needs of others are not necessarily the same as their own. The crew did expect a word from you. Does not your crew expect the same courtesy?"

"No." Lihallot studied the Vulcan in silence. "Does your captain fraternize with his crew very often?" he asked finally.

Spock wondered what prompted the question. He was reluctant to discuss Kirk with an outsider, but considered it his duty to answer. "The Captain has very little time to socialize with anyone. The time he has is usually spent with those officers who are his friends, but he does try to know his entire crew."

Lihallot shook his head in disbelief. "Your Starfleet Command is foolish to allow it. Camaraderie in the service is excellent in theory, but in practice it leads to men who take advantage of such familiarity and could lead to conflicts of interest if a captain's duty requires the sacrifice of one of his friends. The temptation to balance the rewards gained by the whole against the cost to the individual becomes a great risk. Starfleet Command can not afford to allow its command personnel to make such decisions. There would be no unity of purpose."

Spock tensed in defense. "A starship captain never allows friendship to interfere with his command. No one rises to the rank without being well acquainted with difficult decisions and personal sacrifice. However, he also does not consider any crewmen expendable. Each man is an important and valuable part of the Federation."

"I did not mean to offend," Lihallot apologized.

"Misunderstandings are unavoidable until we learn more about each other," Spock conceded.

"And that's what this is all about, isn't it, Mr. Spock? You pose some interesting points." Having finished his meal, Lihallot excused himself and withdrew, leaving the Vulcan alone with his thoughts.

The needs of society vs. the value of the individual, Spock mused. Too bad Jim wasn't present to argue that one. Lihallot would be in for a lively debate.

* * *

Kirk sank wearily into the desk chair in his quarters, grateful that he'd had the foresight to pack a bottle of brandy among his things. The session in the briefing room still held a sense of unreality for him. He was used to a crew that showed some initiative toward independent thinking and encouraged open debate aboard the Enterprise, but the calm, cold discussion of priorities, gains, and duties that had occurred a few hours ago dismayed him. People lay dead, murdered on an isolated outpost by a weapon or method the Science Officer found impossible to identify.

The main objection had been the lack of concrete evidence that would give them an idea where to look. The general consensus had been to end the fruitless investigation, report it, and see what happened next.

Kirk couldn't let it go that easily -- something in the way the heavily-armed fortress-like outpost had been obliterated warned him that this danger had to be met now, before it chose its next victim. The technology of the Billihallian Confederation was roughly comparable to the Federation; the destruction of one outpost by unknown methods posed a threat to all.

Beyond that, Kirk could not forget the image of the bodies that lay broken and burnt amid the devastation. He was surprised at the apparent lack of compassion among his new staff. There had been the usual initial shock, followed by anger. However, the anger seemed to be centered around the fact that someone had dared to attack the Confederation, as if the Billihallians considered their space inviolate.

Kirk remembered that McCoy had once teased him that his worse nightmare would be to wake up to discover he was in command of a totally Vulcan ship. He smiled as he sipped his drink, feeling oddly certain he would actually prefer a ship full of Vulcans to this crew. At least Vulcan logic placed a high value on life and would understand his insistence that they search until they had a clue to what had happened.

He sighed. Perhaps he could content himself with the fact that they obeyed his orders without question once he'd impatiently closed the discussion with the announcement of his intentions, but the air of disagreement made him wish once again he was aboard the Enterprise, with the crew he knew he could count on when the chips were down.

He stared at his empty glass, thinking of the Enterprise. He reached for the bottle, hesitated, then capped it and put it away. Standing, the ache in his shoulder muscles reminded him of the tightness there and he decided that a thorough workout in the gym was just what he needed.

* * *

The turbolift deposited Spock on the bridge and he quickly scanned all posts as he did at the beginning of each shift. His eyes rested on the command circle and the all too familiar feeling returned. The passage of a week had done nothing to lessen the pain, or deaden the knot of fear buried deep inside him -- the constant anxiety that at any moment the Enterprise might receive a message he dreaded to even think about. No, he had not yet adjusted to Kirk's absence and neither had the rest of the crew, although their level of efficiency showed their determination to make the Captain proud of them. They might be more restrained than usual, but they performed as well as ever, despite the lack of any activity more interesting than star-mapping. Yes, Jim would be pleased with them, Spock reflected.

He crossed to his station and quickly ran through the sensor data collected on the last shift. Nothing unusual and nothing interesting. What was occupying Jim's attention at the moment, Spock wondered. Was he bored or was everything a new and exciting adventure to him?

Upon ascertaining that everything was functioning normally on the ship, Spock reflected that Lihallot had made some attempts to reach the crew this past week, despite his earlier lack of interest. Although his presence was accepted with politeness and a willingness to cooperate and communicate, his reception lacked the warmth usually given to newcomers. Not unexpected, Spock speculated, since no one had ever replaced the Captain before.

With a sigh, Spock turned to the computer to engage it in a complex problem particularly designed to take his mind off such ruminations.

Two hours passed before Sulu called, "Another solar system coming within sensor range."

"Readings, Mr. Spock?" Lihallot asked.

"One class M planet, gravity 90% of Earth norm. Abundant supply of dilithium. No immediate indication of intelligent life, although an abundance of life-forms are currently registering."

"Assume standard orbit around the class M planet, Mr. Sulu, when we arrive," Lihallot ordered.

"Aye, aye, sir."

Spock continued to take sensor readings.

"Standard orbit achieved," Sulu announced.

"Set up a landing party as soon as all the sensor readings are in, Mr. Spock."

Ten minutes later, Spock stated, "Sensor readings are finished. The landing party is waiting for us in the transporter room."

"Waiting for us, Mr. Spock? For what?" came the perplexed inquiry from the con. It took a moment for the reason underlying the question to register on the First Officer. Once again, he was reminded of how accustomed he had grown to Kirk's methods of operation. It hadn't even occurred to him that they were not going planetside. Suppressing a vague feeling of disturbance, Spock answered cautiously.

"I had assumed that you planned to lead the landing party yourself, but apparently I was in error."

"Is that standard procedure in the Federation?"

The slight disdainful tone which hinted that the Federation policies were being assessed and found wanting caused Spock to swallow uneasily. "Not precisely," he explained. "There is no set policy on the matter. However, some captains are inclined to lead the landing parties themselves."

Lihallot nodded in understanding. "And you usually accompany your Captain?"

"Affirmative."

Lihallot shook his head in puzzlement. "Seems dangerous to me to risk command personnel for routine matters when we don't know what's down there."

Loyalty seemed to call for some defense, but what? How often had he argued with his Captain using precisely the same reasoning? Long ago, Spock had given up trying to change Kirk's mind -- especially since protest only convinced Kirk to leave him behind. This perfectly logical approach should please him, so why did he find himself troubled by it? And what was that annoying voice that whispered that Jim's way was better?

"There is a certain logic in being present to directly substantiate the decisions you make," Spock began.

"Perhaps," Lihallot answered with lack of interest. "But since we're in no hurry, there's no reason to take chances."

Spock nodded and returned to his post, dispatching the landing party with a small degree of regret. Curious reaction, he mused, as he arched his eyebrows in surprise. Waiting for the data to come in gave Spock ample opportunity to study his reactions. Did he feel envy because the landing party was exploring a new planet while he was sitting here waiting to categorize their discoveries? Is this why Kirk always insisted on going himself? Through his own thwarted curiosity and impatient scientific eagerness, he gained a new insight into Kirk's motivations. No wonder the inherent danger never impressed Jim!

Although he had often insisted that comparisons were illogical when Kirk had questioned him about Captain Pike, Spock now took the time to contrast Lihallot's decision with Kirk's. And then he contemplated what his own decisions would be if he were in command. The result surprised him.

Forced to admit how closely his own methods now paralleled Kirk's, Spock realized just how much association with that one special human being had changed him over the years. No longer thinking only in black and white, as Kirk would put it, he was often inclined to see more logic in illogical behavior than he once would have admitted possible. Watching Lihallot command this week was like a mirror into the past, and with it came a discovery: he didn't regret any of those changes.

When the data started to come in from the landing party, Spock turned his full attention to the task at hand, resigning himself to the disappointment of receiving the information second-hand. Privately he conceded that he missed the excitement of investigating the planet himself and couldn't help worrying that some vital information would be overlooked without his presence.

* * *

Kirk was almost ready to give up the investigation himself after days of fruitless endeavor when he noticed the helmsman lean forward toward his board. The Captain straightened, instantly alert.

"Something coming within sensor range, sir."

"Sound red alert. All hands to battle stations. Let's not take any chances," he said, glancing briefly at communications. With the Billihallian version of the klaxon ringing in his ears, he swivelled back to the helm, calling out to the Science Officer at the same time, "Identification, Mr. Gerriot?"

"None as yet, sir. Craft is still too far away, but is approaching at warp -- "

The Combala shook violently as the deflector screens sustained the first assault.

"Impossible!" shouted the Navigator. "They're much too far -- "

"Can you give me phaser power?" Kirk cut him off tersely as another impact jerked the starship to starboard. The bridge dipped wildly and Kirk wondered fleetingly how the Billihallians had managed to design chairs that seemed to keep their occupants.

"Negative, sir. We're still too far out of range, but I could lay down a pattern as a warning."

"No! Don't give them any ideas of our limitations."

"Shielding down to sixty percent," Gerriot yelled as the bridge shook under another bolt. The lights flickered out briefly and then returned. Several systems were disrupted momentarily until new circuits took over for the strained ones.

"Shielding down to thirty percent."

Kirk swivelled to communications and shouted, "Try contacting them -- all channels. See if we can talk to them."

Kirk didn't wait to see if he got results; he really didn't have much hope in that alternative. He swung back to the helm, clenching his right fist tightly. "We've got to get close enough to use our phasers."

"That's be suicide, sir. They'd blow us apart if we tried."

Kirk glanced briefly at the Science Officer, his annoyance at that statement clear in his eyes. "They're doing a good job of that right now," he snapped. Then he turned to the helm. "Evasive maneuvers toward our target but change directions as often as she'll take it -- anything to throw off their timing."

The helmsman just stared at Kirk as if the Captain were mad. For a moment Kirk feared he'd refuse, but then the helmsman turned and bent to his board, punching in the maneuvers with lightning speed.

At first, Kirk's strategy seemed to be successful with several potential hits being glancing blows or clean misses, but soon the enemy's aim started to get better. "See if you can get her to hover slightly," he ordered.

"Sir?"

"Hover -- as in motionless," Kirk ejaculated impatiently, a little surprised that he had to explain himself. "Damn it! You're at the controls. Use your imagination! That's what you're paid for!"

The helmsman felt an instant of panic as he realized that Kirk had no intention of giving him a second by second account of what he should do. He wasn't quite sure he knew what to do, what Kirk expected, or even where to find the abilities Kirk obviously had confidence in, but it was clear that the Captain wanted results and wanted them fast.

Within minutes, the Combala was within phaser range, but not without a price. Two screens were gone and maneuvering now became an effort to protect the exposed areas as well as a part of strategy. Minor damage was found on the lower levels.

For a while, the battled seemed evenly matched and paced, but then a lucky shot blew out the warp drive and sent the starship careening wildly until the Billihallians were able to get her under control.

The bridge crew was a mass of bruises and cuts, but so far no serious injuries had occurred. Engineering was another matter, and Kirk wasted no time listening to the shouts of casualty numbers. He wiped the blood from his mouth and listened grimly to the Science Officer's hurried report: warp drive out, maneuverable on impulse only, but not full capacity.

"Okay, Mr. Gerriot. I have one more trick up my sleeve." Praying that this crew would be as trusting and flexible as his own crew to what might seem like a wild idea, Kirk stepped down to the helm. He didn't want to think about what might happen if they failed him.

* * *

About three hours after planetfall, Spock stiffened with a soft involuntary cry.

The gesture did not go unnoticed by the rest of the bridge crew. Scott hurried to his side. "What is it, Mr. Spock?"

Spock didn't answer, although he could suddenly feel the eyes of each Human rivetted on him. How could he explain to them that across the expanse of space, he knew that Jim was in trouble and needed his help?

The crew needed no explanation for apprehension to creep in. They recalled seeing Spock react this way only once before -- the time the Intrepid was destroyed. Darting glances were exchanged around the bridge, the similarity unnerving everyone. Almost in concert, their thoughts turned to Kirk.

"They say Vulcans can sense when something happens to someone close to them," Sulu whispered uneasily.

"And Mr. Spock and the Keptin are certainly close," Chekov faltered.

Spock stared at Scott as he pondered what to do. How would Lihallot react to the suggestion that his ship was in trouble, without evidence to substantiate it? Spock knew that Uhura would widen her reception without question if he asked her, but to do so without informing the Captain seemed unthinkable. Realizing that Scott was still waiting for an answer, Spock quietly said, "The Combala."

Scott didn't wait to hear any more once his suspicions were confirmed. His urgent pace across the deck roused the rest out of suspended motion. Uhura busied herself with her communications board. Sulu and Chekov turned to the helm sensors. Without even thinking about the rapport that enabled the crew to understand without words what needed to be done, Spock moved to assist Uhura in her efforts.

* * *

The brilliant flash of the explosion signalled an end to the grim battle. Kirk stared at the viewscreen in a haze of pain. Ever since that last blast which had almost torn apart the bridge, he had been pressing his arm into his side, trying unsuccessfully to keep the blood from seeping across the velour. Determination and stubbornness had kept him going through the crisis but now, as he listened to the yell from the helm, he was fighting against unconsciousness.

"We got them!"

Yes, but at what price? Kirk thought, as the debris around him invaded his awareness. There was no joy in the fact that his gamble had paid off, only relief that it was finally over.

He gave the necessary orders automatically, his mind barely concentrating on what he was saying. He shrugged off the attempts at aid and listened numbly to the reports.

Turning to the communication station, his dulling senses identified the body slumped over it. Judging that the others already had enough to do, he forced himself to stand and propelled his body toward the console, although the pain and pressure in his chest made breathing agonizingly difficult. Broken ribs, perhaps, he thought vaguely. Just one more job to do...

Working mostly on instinct, he sent out a distress call, but swayed against the board before he could start another. As he sought to steady himself, he became peripherally aware that something was wrong on the board. He heard a shout just as the board exploded in front of him, the blast throwing him against the next panel.

As he lost consciousness, firm hands grabbed him to break his fall. He mumbled, "Spock..."

* * *

Uhura's strained voice cut through the background noise. "Captain, I've intercepted a very weak distress signal from what sounds like the Combala."

Lihallot froze. "My ship?"

"Yes, sir. I have confirmation now. She's been attacked and severely damaged. They must have broadcasted in all directions, hoping to intercept help. I have no way of verifying if anyone heard it." She added pensively, "The message was weak and not repeated."

Sulu's fingers danced across the board as he calculated an intercept course to the given coordinates. "Course computed and laid in, sir. ETA -- "

"Never mind, Mr. Sulu. Lt. Uhura, relay the SOS to Billihallia in case the Combala didn't get through to her. Though the Combala appears to be between us and home, she's closer to Billihallia than to us. It'll take days for our communique to arrive, but at least we know our communications are fully intact."

A stunned silence followed as all eyes turned to the Captain. His hands were clenched tightly in front of him and he stared at them with narrow lips, but there were no other signs of stress.

"Ye mean ye're no' plannin' t'answer the distress call?" Scott's tone was incredulous.

"It isn't necessary. One of our patrol ships will undoubtedly pick her up. She is within our space."

Spock straightened. "There is no adequate way to determine if another ship has picked up her signal."

Lihallot's eyes reflected his anxiety, but his voice was unshaken. "No, not until we receive verification from Command Central."

"By then it could be too late," Scott insisted.

Lihallot focused calmly on the Engineer. "We also have ships on regular patrol, Mr. Scott. Considering how far away she is, if one of our ships doesn't find her, we'll only be in time to pick up the corpses."

"Nevertheless -- "

"You're being unreasonable. We can't leave this area open to danger." Lihallot's eyes revealed the difficulty of his decision, but his voice was firm. "I have no idea what attacked my ship and until I know that, I dare not take the responsibility of leaving this sector open to possible attack. The relations between your people and mine may ride on our decisions, gentlemen."

"Captain Kirk wouldna hesitate t'take the responsibility!" Scott challenged stiffly.

"But he's not in command right now, I am!" Lihallot reminded him, his eyes blazing. "There must be another ship assigned to the same area. We'll know..." he compressed his lips, "shortly."

"And if there is no ship nearby," Spock insisted, "then our failure to respond sentences those men to certain death."

Lihallot stared at the Vulcan. "The fortunes of war, Mr. Spock. Everyone takes the same gamble. One ship isn't worth risking the safety of this quadrant -- especially when the probability of success is low."

"The preservation of life is a high priority in the Federation, Captain," Spock commented. A murmur of assent followed his words.

Lihallot regarded the Vulcan with surprise -- as if protest was unexpected from that corner. "And that's precisely why we're not leaving here without orders. Any rash action on our part may endanger the alliance between your Federation and mine. Like it or not, I have a responsibility here. We all have our duties to perform, gentlemen," he said, as he glanced around the bridge, "and I suggest you return to yours."

Spock turned back toward his computer and clenched his fists tightly at his sides in an effort to suppress the fury that was building in his heart. The coldness of numbers, of trading off lives, he reflected. With a new clarity he fully understood why Humans reacted so violently to it, and he marvelled at the memory of Kirk's amused indulgence of his own callousness. *Jim...*

He heard Scott yell with defiance, "Look, mon! If ye thin' this crew's goin t'sit by an' do nothin' while the Captain may be dyin' -- "

"Mr. Scott!" Spock commanded firmly, turning back to the con. The air was charged with rebellion and Spock knew that the engineer's sentiments were reflected at every post. If he didn't do something quick to dissipate the mutinous atmosphere, there was no telling what would happen.

"Mr. Spock!" Scott's face reflected his shock. " 'Tis *the Captain* we're talkin' about!"

Spock walked toward the two officers with deliberate steps, rivetting the engineer's eyes to his own, and silently pleading with Scott to let him handle it. He saw the Scotsman make a visible effort to calm down and was relieved that his message was understood.

The seditious tension on the bridge eased somewhat, as if the little scenario had convinced them that Spock would take care of everything. All eyes were on him, waiting -- expecting him to pull them out of this dilemma. Spock could almost read their thoughts: that nothing in the universe would stop him from going to his Captain. And he felt a flash of admiration for Kirk's ability to consistently cope with this type of confidence.

Mumbling something under his breath, Scott returned to his post and dropped heavily into his chair, punching switches with vehemence. Spock turned to the Billihallian commander and almost smiled at the genuine consternation he read in the Captain's face. Under other circumstances, he would have told him that one eventually learns to cope with these erratic outbursts, but for now, he needed the support such emotional displays lent.

"The crew will not rest easy until you allow them to attempt rescue themselves," Spock explained, keeping his voice even in spite of his anxiety. "It is second nature to them to respond to distress calls."

"For what purpose, Mr. Spock? We cannot possibly get there before one of my own ships could. The ship was attacked near the Confederation's territory and no doubt rescue operations are already in progress."

"If there were indeed some way to verify your supposition, the situation would be different. Since there is not, it is logical -- "

"It is *illogical* for us to leave our assigned area when there is no guarantee we could arrive in time to be of any assistance." Lihallot was becoming annoyed at this questioning of his orders. He resolved to maintain his position.

"Nevertheless, if there is any chance at all, we are morally obligated to try. Not only

is this fundamental to our culture, but it is *illogical* to expect this crew to sit idly by when people need help. They are used to taking action themselves -- to wait patiently until someone else effects rescue is not a Human trait."

"You forget, Mr. Spock, that is *my* ship that was destroyed," Lihallot grated, his eyes narrowing in anger. "That is *my* crew, *my* friends. Do you think I'm any less concerned about them than your crew is about your Captain? He's only one man. Are you saying his life is more important than the others?"

"Every life is important," Spock insisted. "This underlying belief is deeply ingrained in a starship crew."

"Discipline is necessary, whether we like it or not. Orders are not to be countermanded lightly. Decisions must be made by Command Central, not by individual starship commanders who go running around the galaxy, doing as they please. It is our way. We know where our duty lies."

Anger flashed in Spock's eyes in spite of his control. Jim could be hurt, dying, while he was standing here wasting time, arguing uselessly with a stranger who obviously didn't understand. Only his knowledge of the importance of their mission kept him from flinging the Billihallian bodily out of the command chair. The crew would support him if he assumed command -- no questions asked; they were as anxious to get underway as he. His fingers flexed with anticipation, and he clenched them in an effort to maintain control.

When he spoke again, Spock's voice was edged with a hardness rarely heard. "Captain Lihallot, at present time there is no overt threat to the Federation. If another ship should arrive there first, then we will have wasted only time and effort, but if not... if the Combala should need our help, then we will be in a position to provide it. Either way makes little difference. A starship may be built for exploration and defense, but its primary purpose is contact and preservation of life. These are the fundamentals by which we live."

"Aye, 'tis people who are important, no' yer precious rules and duties," Scott interjected beligerently.

For a moment, Lihallot wavered, then he insisted, "Only by following orders can we insure the safety of the people entrusted to our care."

Spock realized why Lihallot's viewpoint differed so radically from theirs in this matter. It was clear that Billihallian leaders were not given the same degree of independence accorded Federation starship captains, nor were they encouraged to take such initiative on their own. What he and his comrades proposed to do must seem like a perilous gamble to Lihallot, one that the alien hesitated to take. How does one explain the value of life to one whose concepts of its worth were so different?

"You talk of duty and discipline," Spock added. "It isn't that which makes a starship crew willing to lay down their lives when necessary. Whether or not you think the attempt is irrational or useless is of little importance. When people need help, nothing will prevent this crew from offering it."

"Aye, and we'll do it, even if we have t'do it over ye!" Scott threatened, coming to stand by Spock's side in a show of solidarity.

"You gentlemen are talking mutiny," Lihallot reminded them.

"Aye, 'tis been done before!" Scott retorted, before Spock silenced him with a look.

"There are some things that are more important than the Service and its codes," Spock warned. "And forcing this crew to decide where their obligations lie will not help relations between our people."

"Seems like an inefficient way to run a fleet," Lihallot muttered, almost under his breath. "It's a wonder your Federation made it this far."

Spock pretended not to hear the last words. "What good is an alliance between us if we don't try to understand each other's needs and values? It is the only way to compliment each other."

Lihallot acknowledged the truth of that argument. Looking from one face to the other, he also realized he had little choice. "Very well," he capitulated. "Perhaps we are often too quick to forget what should be of value in life. Call back the landing party. We'll warp out as soon as they're in."

"Aye, aye, sir," chorused Uhura and Sulu simultaneously.

Spock inclined his head and walked back to his station with a private sigh of relief. Even the hum of furious activity was a source of comfort. If only he could be certain about Jim... *worry serves no purpose*, he reminded himself. *It is illogical and there is much to do.* Spock focused his attention on the computer.

Lihallot approached the Vulcan. "Mr. Spock," he asked quietly, "what is your Captain like that he produces such a response in his crew?"

Spock looked up quickly, somewhat startled. It was as if he had asked the Vulcan to define the lure of beauty. Not an impossible task, but certainly elusive enough to make any answer incomplete. "That is not easy to explain. Perhaps part of the answer is that they know he would never abandon them -- that he values each and every one of them more than his own life. He expects much of them and they are willing to give whatever he wants." Spock stopped, reluctant to put into words for a stranger that which he rarely analyzed for himself.

Lihallot didn't press the Vulcan for further explanation. He shrugged as if Spock's words required more thought, and returned to the con.

* * *

The Enterprise was still two days short of interception when word came that the Combala had been found. The crew was too relieved to care that Lihallot's prediction had been correct. Intercepted by the Croyan, the Combala had been judged unworthy of repair and destroyed.

However, the attacking vessel had been demolished. The Croyan had managed to salvage some of the alien wreckage and Billihallian scientists were eagerly examining the debris in hopes of piecing together the unfamiliar technology. Unfortunately, there were no survivors to question so identity was still unknown.

The news that this new danger would probably solidify the alliance between the Billihallian Confederation and the Federation without more debate did not raise spirits aboard the Enterprise. One-third of the Combala's crew had been lost, and half of the survivors were injured -- including a certain captain.

The only solace was the fact that Captain Kirk had managed to defeat the aggressor and save his crew. The Billihallians were impressed enough to formally compliment the Enterprise. However, the sheer price of the victory subdued whatever triumph and pride the Enterprise's crew may have shared in their Captain's accomplishment.

Command Central relayed to the Croyan that the Enterprise was on her way. Apparently, the Billihallian medical personnel were not overly eager to take responsibility for a Human life, because the Croyan quickly established communication with the Enterprise and plotted an intercept course. Both sickbays were patched into each other. McCoy maintained contact with their doctors, supplying whatever crucial knowledge they needed until the two starships could meet each other.

Rendezvous was still hours away, even with Mr. Scott 'nursing his engines for all they were worth'. Gloom settled over the bridge as they waited for one of sickbay's infrequent reports

When, finally, the Enterprise met the Croyan, Lihallot was not oblivious to the change in mood on the bridge. After a brief conversation with the other commander, he ordered a medical team to stand by in the transporter room.

As Lihallot rose from the command chair, he noticed Spock moving silently toward the turbolift. He frowned as if he considered this a presumption of authority, but said nothing. Turning briefly to Sulu, he relegated the con to the helmsman and joined the Vulcan waiting for him in the turbolift.

They rode in silence to the transporter room.

Lihallot indicated no surprise at seeing the Chief Medical Officer heading the medical team or the Chief Engineer at the transporter controls. If he thought their behavior unusual or if he was impressed by their obvious devotion to their Captain, he kept such opinions to himself. His only word was the order to energize.

Three figures and a stretcher assumed shape on the platform. The materialization was barely complete before Spock and McCoy were at their Captain's side, leaving Lihallot to deal with his countrymen.

Although Kirk's face was pale, he was conscious and managed a weak grin to reassure his friends' concerned expressions. McCoy's mediscanner hummed as he took preliminary readings. His face showed relief as he realized Kirk's condition had improved since his last communication with the Billihallian doctors.

He met Spock's eyes with a smile. Standing, he ordered his staff to take Kirk to sickbay. He then turned to the doctors to thank them for what they'd done before excusing himself to follow his patient.

Spock expected Lihallot to invite his compatriots to a short visit or, at least, a tour of the ship, a courtesy Kirk automatically extended whenever contact was made with another ship. He was therefore somewhat surprised at the abrupt departure of the Billihallians after their task was discharged.

Lihallot walked to the intercom and ordered the Enterprise to return to its assigned sector and then he motioned Spock to accompany him to the bridge. Once there, he sent status reports to both Starfleet Command and Billihallia, then returned to routine matters while he waited for new instructions.

* * *

Kirk opened his eyes to see McCoy hovering over him, his eyes intent upon the monitors. Kirk enjoyed the few moments of covertly watching his friend before the doctor noticed him. He grinned weakly at McCoy. McCoy returned his smile with a warm, "Welcome back, Jim. How do you feel?"

"Glad to be home, Bones. You don't know how good it is." He pushed himself up on his elbow, waving off McCoy's attempts to stop him and ignoring the warning against reopening his wounds.

For a moment, he had to fight the dizziness accompanying the sudden movement, but then he surveyed the room as if seeing it for the first time. He dropped back against the pillow with a sigh. "You can't imagine how much I missed this place."

"Funny, judging by the way you complain when you're here, I always thought you disliked the place," McCoy remarked wryly.

"A most logical reaction to your over-solicitous bedside manner," Spock added, as he approached the other side of the bed, hands clasped behind his back in a familiar pose.

McCoy's retort was stopped by Kirk's delighted laugh. "One thing the Combala definitely lacked was all this bickering. How did Lihallot ever manage to keep the two of you in line?" he teased, turning from McCoy to Spock.

"Captain," Spock admonished. They held each other's eyes in silence, as if unwilling to break the mood with words.

McCoy glanced from one to the other and decided to withdraw. He squeezed Kirk's hand affectionately and said, "I'll see you later, Jim."

Kirk glanced up at the doctor, nodded, and then followed his movement to the door. Turning back to the Vulcan, he saw the warm welcome in the dark eyes. "I missed you, you know."

Spock arched a brow in mock skepticism. "With a new and unusual ship in which to rummage around, a completely unfamiliar area of space to explore, and a different and unsuspecting crew

to bend to your will, *that* seems hardly logical."

Kirk's eyes twinkled in response to the tone. "No, Spock. It's better to have friends with you. Much better." He mentally traced the Vulcan's features with his eyes and before Spock could answer, he added seriously, "I never realized just how important that really was."

Spock thought of the debt he owed Lihallot. Without the presence of the Billihallian, he would have never explored the changes in his own attitudes that had occurred through association with this one special man. Kirk had taught him more than he could ever acknowledge, just by being himself. "Perhaps as important as it is to have the proper center," Spock added softly, returning Kirk's gaze with equal intensity, "for it is the center which binds everything together and when removed, can not be replaced."

Kirk smiled and let his thoughts retreat to the ship. He felt at peace just knowing he was back aboard her, and that she was safe. "I suppose Lihallot has the con." Kirk's eyes reflected his bitterness as he said, "I didn't do so well taking care of his ship." He turned his attention to the ceiling, unable to face his friend with his burden. He pressed a clenched fist against his forehead, as if to shield himself from the memory.

"Jim," Spock said, instantly worried, "the Billihallians were impressed with the way you handled the situation. They recognized the difficulties involved and probably were even surprised that you managed to accomplish what you did. Captain, there's no guarantee that the Enterprise could have done better and there's certainly no question whether or not another captain could have obtained victory with less damage."

"It isn't that," Kirk whispered. "It's just hard to lose a ship -- any ship. All those men. Spock, perhaps it is recklessness to assume that we can handle whatever we encounter. Perhaps those men would be alive if I'd been more cautious. Called for help at the first sign of trouble. Something."

"Captain, the number of starships is few in comparison to the vastness of space. It is by necessity that they be capable of handling situations on their own. And it is imperative that they are manned by men of independence and initiative -- men with the ability to survive against odds."

"I know that, Spock, but..."

"You cannot blame yourself for encountering superior technology. You and I have met more advanced races often enough to dispel any erroneous notions that we are 'all-powerful'. Given time and opportunity, we will contact them and form an alliance to strengthen all of us."

Turning back to face Spock, Kirk smiled at the echo of his own brand of confidence. "Enough, Spock," he chided. "The words sound familiar."

They lapsed into silence -- a quiet sharing that said more than words. It was enough to be back together again.

Pulling himself out of his reverie, Kirk said, "Spock, have you ever noticed how well our crew works together -- how they respond in a pinch as if they're conscious of what each other is doing -- how they know what's needed without being told?"

"Everyone working in harmony, Captain? Not surprising. Your frequent compliments on their performance only increases their striving for distinction."

"Think so, Spock? I think I'm fortunate to have such a good crew. The Combala seemed to lack..." he stopped, certain that Spock wouldn't understand his feelings.

"A certain flexibility," Spock finished for him. "The ability to respond to situations on faith -- whether or not they could understand what you were doing."

Kirk nodded, surprised at the Vulcan's intuitiveness. "I wonder if I ever really appreciated my crew -- appreciated what I have. I wonder if I sometimes expect too much."

Spock lifted an eyebrow in amusement. "Why? Because you ask for the impossible and usually get it?"

Kirk looked momentarily stunned, then he laughed. "C'mon, Spock. I'm not that bad, am I?"

"No, just exceptional."

The emotions Kirk read in his friend dispelled the last traces of the loneliness he'd been feeling. He shifted slightly to get more comfortable. The instantaneous aid Spock offered reminded him of where he was. "Not exactly the way I planned to return home," he murmured. He smiled ruefully at the Vulcan as if in apology for being in sickbay.

"Yes, you did not give me sufficient opportunity to explore new chess techniques," Spock baited, picking up on Kirk's words.

"Oh, no?" Kirk responded. "Well, as soon as I can sit up long enough," he teased, "I'm going to show you how it's done."

"Has someone been giving you lessons, Captain?" Spock returned in kind.

"You're going to pay for that remark, Spock," Kirk promised. "I've had a whole week to figure out exactly how I'm going to trounce you."

* * *

When the Enterprise rendezvoused with the Billihallian ship sent to take Lihallot home, both Kirk and Spock accompanied him to the transporter room. Kirk shook hands with the other captain.

"I'm sorry we had so little time together, Captain. Perhaps someday we'll get a chance to know each other better."

Lihallot nodded in agreement and said, "I would like that. You have a fine crew, Captain. My compliments to you. It has been interesting to work with them."

Kirk grinned with pleasure. "Thank you, sir. They're indeed a good crew."

An unreadable expression flickered through the Billihallian's eyes as he studied Kirk. Whatever questions or comments he might have had he kept to himself as he turned toward the Vulcan.

Spock raised his hand in the Vulcan salute. "Live long and prosper, Captain. May our association prove beneficial to both our people in the future."

Lihallot bowed at Spock's words. "Both our ways are equally valuable, Mr. Spock," he conceded. "We have much to learn from each other."

"Such exchange can only strengthen all involved," Spock returned.

Lihallot nodded and gestured farewell. He stepped onto the platform and was soon gone from sight, leaving Kirk and Spock to face one another.

Kirk was not oblivious to the nuances in the exchange. It was apparent to him that something had occurred during his absence that Spock had neglected to tell him. Suppressing his curiosity for the moment, he walked to the console and contacted the bridge. He told Sulu to alter course for home and then he turned back to Spock.

"Well, Mr. Spock," Kirk teased. "Did you find your new commanding officer *fascinating*?"

"It was an interesting experience, Captain," Spock returned in kind.

Kirk waited for elaboration, but Spock didn't oblige him. Finally, he waved Spock to the door, tapping his shoulder lightly with his other hand. With a mischievous twinkle in his eye, he warned, "You *are* going to tell me about it, Spock... later."

* * *

Spock surveyed the bridge from his station. He noted with satisfaction that everything was back to normal, as his eyes roamed from communications to engineering to helm. One could almost feel an air of contentment pervading the bridge, as everyone carried on his duties with usual efficiency. Spock checked the subjective observation with a silent rebuke and rested his eyes on the command console. The familiar sight filled him with gratitude and peace. It was good to see Kirk back where he belonged.

Spock feasted his eyes on the tousled head, drinking in the almost boyish look of contemplation. He perceived how easily this moment could be shattered forever -- conscious of the fragile threads which bound their lives together. And with the understanding of the tenuous nature of the future came the realization that Kirk had taught him more than the true meaning of leadership or even friendship: the Human had also given him a means of coping with separation. Death was the reality with which they lived every day of their lives. It was a fact of life that he would not always be there to protect Kirk from harm -- a fact he had always faced as part of the discipline of logic, although he did his best to prevent it. But the key was in recognizing that the time spent together was precious and not to be wasted. Humans were right when they said that it didn't matter how this time was spent as long as it was spent together. All life is a gamble, Kirk had once said, so live life --

He glanced at Kirk and read the welcome relief and pleasure in his friend's face. He held Kirk's eyes with his own until the Human's lips curved into a smile of understanding. Then he turned back to his station, allowing pure contentment to seep through his being. Reminded of another Human saying: *all's well...* he relaxed his mind and concentrated on his duties. The Enterprise was heading home.

"Message from Starfleet coming in, Captain," Uhura called.

Spock moved protectively to Kirk's side with a quickness which would have appeared unhurried to any observer. Kirk met his eyes for a moment, then spoke over his shoulder, "Put it on the screen, Lieutenant."

The face of Admiral Morell lit up the screen. "Captain Kirk, I thought you'd like to know that the Billihallians have expressed the desire for complete cooperation between our respective councils. My commendations to you and your crew."

Kirk straightened with pride. "Thank you, Admiral."

"In recognition of your fine job, I'm hereby authorizing a special two week R&R for the Enterprise, applicable to any planet of your choice -- within reason, of course."

"I understand the planet New Horizon in the Barrillian system has some interesting activities," Spock suggested.

Kirk glanced quizzically at him, but fortunately for Spock, his face remained blank. "It is close by, Captain," Spock offered in explanation. Kirk turned his attention to the screen.

"Admiral, my Science Officer recommends we take our R&R in the Barrillian system."

"Very well, Captain. It is hereby authorized. Admiral Morell out."

When the picture faded from the screen, Kirk turned his attention to his friend. With a glint in his eye, he said, "Well, well, Mr. Spock. Are *you* suddenly interested in shore leave? I thought it was illogical."

Spock almost smiled. "In this case, it is logical." He turned quickly back toward his station, leaving Kirk to figure out what he meant.



COMING HOME

BY della van hise

How long has it been since I gazed at your face?
...When was the last time I looked in your eyes?
So many years, given in grace...
But now I'm coming home.

The days that we shared on our Lady of Light,
Crawl lazily through my trembling heart,
And I am alone in infinite night...
But now I'm coming home.

Though I am still shackled by logic's bitter chains
Other Humans I've known are all in the past,
When I look back quietly, remembering you...
I am eager to come home.

I remember that day -- when I knew you were gone,
And the tide of grief which swallowed my soul.
Then, my friend, I did not wish to survive --
I was ready to follow you home.

This Human half which showed me Love's dawn
Has long been a memory, a haunting ghost;
It forced me to live though you were gone...
When I only wanted to come home.

I close my eyes, - safe warmth in your soul,
Now knowing a truth I'd only sensed before;
We walk hand in hand through an endless night's light...
Now, Jim... and together... we are home...



We Are One

*Reach out and take my hand
Learn how to understand
The stars can be ours...*

*Touch me and know my soul
Join me and make me whole
It's real what we feel.*

*More than a brother and
More even than a friend
We've learned, learned the way to share
Long as you are there
I can go on...*

*No longer stand apart
There's only one path to chart
The stars can be ours...*

*Now our beings merge
So much love to learn
It's real what we feel.*

*You are the one I know
The one who can take my soul
Beyond, beyond infinity
And I know we'll be
Forever one...*

*Reach for the stardust
Hands touch and we both trust
You see, you need me
And I need you...*

*Reach out and take my hand
Learn how to understand
The stars can be ours...*

*Touch me and know my soul
Join me and make me whole
It's real what we feel.*

*Contact, reach deep inside
No longer can we hide
We reach, reach out from the heart
Here is where it starts
For we are one... one...
We are One.*

Words and music by Martha J. Bonds

FIRE and ICE

by **sandra gent** and **virginia green**



*Bury here and forever all hope of Paradise:
I come to lead you to the other shore,
Into eternal dark, into fire and ice.*
—Dante Alighieri, *The Inferno*

A loud, booming noise, like an explosion, awoke Kirk with a start, nearly throwing him out of bed. To his fuzzy and distorted senses, it seemed only minutes since he had fallen asleep. He made a pass at his bedside communications console, his hand connecting with nothing but air. It was then he remembered he was in the guest quarters of a science complex on Theta Draconis, not on board the *Enterprise*. Alarm bells began echoing in the background and he clambered to his feet, pulling on his clothes and boots hastily.

At a run, Kirk bolted into the corridor, plowing headfirst into a technician scurrying through the narrow passage. The man shoved him roughly aside, panic and fear distorting his features into a frozen mask. He was oblivious to Kirk's inquiries as to what was happening. Without a word, he joined the growing flood of people streaming madly by in both directions.

A somewhat disheveled Vulcan stepped out of the next doorway, a slightly puzzled frown drawing his canted eyebrows to an even more acute angle. He looked up as Kirk approached.

"What's going on, Spock?"

"Unknown, Captain. I judge it to be some manner of emergency, however," he added as the crowd thrust him into Kirk in their efforts to get around them.

Kirk's hands grasped Spock's arms, righting both himself and his first officer, then he steered the Vulcan into the chaotic flow of traffic. "Let's see if we can find an answer."

They had almost reached the end of the long corridor, propelled along by the frantic push of the mob, when Spock's sensitive hearing picked up the sound of someone screaming. He forged ahead of Kirk, brushing past the endless hoard of men and women, and ducked into a doorway.

Kirk was only several paces behind him, but by the time he entered the room he found Spock attempting to restrain a living pillar of fire. The Vulcan held on tenaciously as the man's frenzied contortions sent them crashing about, slamming into machinery and benches. Beakers and vials of chemicals shattered, spilling their contents onto the floor. Finally Spock managed to subdue the

writhing figure with a neck pinch, using his body to smother the flames on the Human torch. Kirk's endeavors were directed to extinguishing the embers still smoldering down the length of the charred torso.

The laboratory was a panorama of small blazes, fueled by flammable liquids and chemicals igniting and spraying the room. Heat beat at them, threatening to scorch their skin through their uniforms, and waves of toxic fumes billowed out and around them. Kirk's eyes started to tear, his lungs burning as though he couldn't draw enough air. A spasm of coughing doubled him over as Spock examined the man, detecting a feeble pulse.

Kirk straightened, forcing himself to take shallow breaths. It was an effort to speak. "We'd better get out of here. The whole place is about to go up." His gaze fastened on Spock as the Vulcan bent to gather the inert form in his arms. His usually meticulous first officer's hair was singed, his face and tunic smeared with black smudges. And his hands. . . . Even as Kirk watched, he could see blisters forming on the bright green flesh. "Spock, your hands."

Spock shook his head in dismissal. "Superficial, Captain."

Kirk didn't believe him, however, the stubborn look on Spock's face told him further discussion was useless. Too, this was hardly the time to stand around debating the obvious. He nodded sharply, reaching out to relieve Spock of his burden, but the Vulcan was already striding toward the door. Kirk had to hurry to catch up.

The corridor, which had been swarming with people scant seconds before, was deserted, save for thick clouds of smoke surging from every ventilation duct. They stopped a few meters from the lab. Kirk felt for his communicator, only to have his fingers close on emptiness; it had been left behind in his room. Cursing his neglect as well as haste, and delivering a mental kick to the seat of his trousers for his stupidity, he checked for the Vulcan's communicator. A vacant velcro patch greeted him.

"Gone!" He added several more appropriate expletives, muttering them to himself.

Spock's expression was grim. "It must have been dislodged in the laboratory."

Urgent footsteps carried Kirk back to the lab to throw the door open. Flames shot into the corridor, licking hungrily at him. There was no possibility now of retrieving Spock's communicator. But. . . .

The rest of the sentence loomed like a large question mark. If. . . *if* they could just get to his own communicator, Kirk finished the thought. He moved quickly ahead of Spock, leading the way.

Halfway down the corridor, Kirk discovered their path was blocked. Debris had fallen through the ceiling, leaving a gaping hole that gave a clear view of the inferno raging overhead. Huge tongues of fire leapt upward, the flames crackling obscenely.

Their last hope of contacting the *Enterprise* was buried in the rubble in front of them. And behind. . . . Kirk's mind began racing, trying desperately to picture the various exits he had passed the previous day, when he had wandered aimlessly about, rather bored because Spock had been occupied with meetings. It

seemed to him there was a side corridor. . . *somewhere*. . . .

They turned and started back in the direction from which they had come, their progress slowing as their vision became more and more obscured by the smoke. Kirk found the elusive corridor at last and headed down it, testing doors as he went. Each door he tried was either sealed or opened into a room already ablaze.

Another explosion hit just as Kirk located a door which might, hopefully, provide an escape route from the holocaust. Chunks of the ceiling pelted them as they entered the dark, sloping passage. Spock huddled against the wall, attempting to shield the injured man in his arms. When the cascade subsided, he felt Kirk's hand touch his shoulder.

"We'll have to go down," Kirk shouted over the din of the fire. "We've no other choice. Everything above and around us is in flames."

"Agreed," Spock returned. "Laboratories are located throughout the complex. They will eventually detonate in a spontaneous chain reaction."

Kirk kept his morbid thoughts to himself, staying a couple of paces ahead of Spock as they made their way along the dim, narrow passage. The antiquated structure, long beyond remodeling, had been the mecca of its day. Now, though, its winding, confusing layout of slanted ramps and steep stairwells could prove disastrous.

Keep going down, Kirk's mind chanted relentlessly. Even in the subterranean levels, the heat from the fire was building. Sweat bathed his forehead, tracing pale furrows through the grime on his face. There appeared to be a sort of pattern to the corridors, he realized; a ramp, turn right, another ramp, walk twenty meters or so, two more ramps and a short set of stairs. He quelled the irrational sensation of being caught in a mad scientist's sadistic maze, with life dangling at the end like some lewd reward.

They had arrived at the top of a narrow stairway, partially obstructed by debris: gigantic, mountainous blocks of masonry; pieces of metal twisted into grotesque shapes; a body faintly visible, almost buried in the wreckage. As Kirk stepped onto the stairs, a third explosion rocked the building clear to its foundation. His feet were knocked out from under him, but he reached back, trying to somehow keep Spock from falling.

Despite Kirk's fingers wrapping around his arm in support, Spock was slammed brutally into the protruding rubble. Then, the force of the concussion sent them flying toward the bottom of the stairs. Spock twisted in midair, ending with the body he held landing full-force on his abdomen.

Painfully Kirk untangled himself and climbed partway to his feet, easing the unconscious body off Spock. The Vulcan's face was ashen, his eyes closed. And he was still, so very still. . . . Kirk's heart caught in his throat. "Spock! Spock, are you all right?"

Spock didn't attempt to answer as he fought to draw air into his lungs. Instead he nodded, waving Kirk ahead of him. "Go," he rasped finally, with difficulty. "Need. . . a moment. . . ."

Kirk hesitated before gathering the injured Human into his arms. "Are you sure?"

The room contained only one door, therefore only one way in or out. He examined the walls, deciding the coolest must be an exterior wall, flush against the soil. Carefully he moved Spock to it and laid him down. Then, with a haste that was both frantic and deliberate, and driven by guilt, he started dismantling the heavy metal shelves, propping each section over Spock at an angle.

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Although Kirk had no means of realizing it, the entire crew of his ship was acutely aware of the early morning disaster. The sensors had registered an explosion on the planet's surface, pinpointing it as the science complex housing the captain and first officer. When Scott was notified of the incident, he had attempted to contact them. There had been no response. Two more explosions in relatively rapid succession had determined the engineer's course of action.

With Chekov manning the sensors as Sulu oversaw operations on the bridge, Scott had gone to the transporter room to supervise the rescue efforts. Half the medical staff of the ship was beamed down with emergency supplies to tend the injured who had managed to escape the holocaust. The rest of the *Enterprise* medical personnel were standing by to receive those still trapped in the burning building.

Beginning at the ground level, which was heavily involved in fire, and following the natural flow of heat and flames upward, Chekov's sensors isolated life-form readings. The information was transmitted immediately to Scott. He, in turn, beamed the victims directly to the ship. Medical beds lined the corridors, rotating in shifts to convey the patients to Sickbay.

An anxious McCoy hovered beside the transporter platform, scanner in hand, checking each victim's condition before issuing orders to his staff. Whenever Scott pulled the levers and materialization began, McCoy held his breath, saying a prayer that he would find Kirk and Spock in front of him. Again and again he was bitterly disappointed. Now, he watched in grim silence as the latest group were evacuated to Sickbay. With a sigh of frustration, and a feeling of deep dread, he glanced at Scott's haggard face.

As much as he knew they both wanted to search specifically for Jim and Spock, there were far too many lives at stake to risk losing them for the sake of two. All they could do, he kept telling himself, was to work systematically and hope against hope.

Uhura's voice came over the intercom with a note of excitement, interrupting his grisly train of thought. "Mr. Scott, Dr. M'Benga reports a burn patient who says he saw the captain and Mr. Spock together." She paused, apparently listening to M'Benga. "They were alive and well. . . on the ground level. . . in the area of the chemistry lab. They were sighted just after the first explosion."

A faint smile broke the stiff, controlled lines of Scott's mouth. "Thank you, Lieutenant. Mr. Chekov, what level are we evacuating?"

"Ve're on de top lefel, sair," Chekov announced. "Lefel six. Dhere are also tree more below ground," he added. "Should I svitch de sensors to scan. . ."

"Negative." Scott looked up, his eyes meeting McCoy's. "Continue per

Spock nodded again and rose slowly, carefully, to a standing position to prove it.

Reluctantly Kirk started off once more, stealing quick backward glimpses at Spock as he attempted to find a path through the litter on the stairs.

At last nothing remained ahead of them except a short corridor with a heavy metal door at the end. Kirk walked inside the room and laid the burned body on the floor, kneeling beside it. He heard Spock shut the door behind them with a thunderous clang. A chill swept through him. It was like being sealed in a tomb.

Kirk pushed the ominous idea aside and bent over the silent form. For the first time, he was able to really examine the blackened figure he and Spock had carried for what seemed an eternity. Lifeless orbs, already beginning to glaze, leered back at him in mock interest.

"All for nothing," Kirk sighed heavily, half talking to himself. "He's dead." His gaze traveled up to the Vulcan to see him crumbling, as if his knees had suddenly given way. Kirk shot to his feet, grabbing Spock as he collapsed. He was able to break Spock's fall, but the momentum pulled them both onto the floor. Struggling to sit up, he wrapped his arms around Spock, fear gripping his insides, curling his stomach into a tight knot.

Dark eyes stared vacantly. "Dead?" Spock repeated softly. "No. . .no. . ."

Spock's speech was slurred, disjointed. With trembling hands, Kirk placed his palms on either side of Spock's face and leaned down, making sure the Vulcan could see him. "What's wrong, Spock? Tell me what's wrong."

At the touch, a faint light of recognition shone in the pain-filled eyes. "Jim. . .hemorrhaging. . .internal. . . . Must. . .healing trance. . .cannot stop. . ." His voice trailed off and he sagged limply into Kirk's arms.

A sense of utter futility washed over Kirk as he cradled the inert Vulcan. Had they come all this way only to. . . . *No! No!* his mind denied. Images swam in his head, of the many times Spock had gone into his healing trance, times when even McCoy had given up and admitted he could do nothing more. Spock had survived. . . .

Desperately he forced himself to look away from Spock and scan the room, unaware of one hand caressing the Vulcan's cheek. Their refuge was, to all appearances, an old storage area, long since fallen into disuse. Dusty shelving units lined the walls, barren except for an odd, strangely shaped object or two, left behind and forgotten.

His glance shifted to the ceiling above him. The heat was building rapidly, he knew, weakening structural supports and reaching the critical stage when the labs would explode, bringing tons of burning debris tumbling down on them.

Somewhere, beyond the atmosphere of Theta Draconis, the *Enterprise* was orbiting. The ship, with its people and equipment, was their final hope of rescue. But, until then. . .*if*. . . .

He eased Spock gently onto the floor and set about making a thorough inspection of the room, groping for something. . .anything. . . . *Time, time*, his brain repeated. *All Spock needs is time.*



previous instructions."

McCoy started toward the console, no longer able to balance the fact of two, twenty, a thousand lives against Jim and Spock's, just. . . .

Scott shook his head. "We canna be sure which direction they took, Doctor, or even if they're still alive. We could skip down to the subterranean levels, only for them to be on a level we passed by." He stopped, then forced himself to continue, to say the words which were like a knife cutting through him. "The one chance they have is if we keep on as we've been doing."

McCoy turned away, all too aware that Scott was right, his shoulders slumping in resignation.

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For the fifth time in almost as many minutes Kirk stretched and shifted, trying to get some sensation into his cramped back and leg muscles. How long it had been since he had rigged their make-shift shelter, he didn't know. . . didn't *want* to know. The heat from the fire was nearly unbearable now, sweat oozing from every pore of his body, running down his face to sting his eyes.

A sort of fatalism had settled in him, banishing guilt to a far corner of his mind. There was nothing more he could do, merely wait. When the temperature reached a certain point, the building would explode, sheets of flame and tons of smoking debris raining down to bury all their hopes and dreams and. . . .

He looked over at Spock, laying beside him. The Vulcan's face had regained some of its normal color, and his breathing was becoming irregular and labored. Was Spock beginning to come out of his healing trance? He placed a hand on Spock's shoulder, squeezing it gently. He wasn't sure whether he was comforting or being comforted by the touch. He really didn't care which. All he knew was the warmth of the flesh beneath his fingers made him feel less alone.

There had been too many years of emptiness, more than he wanted to remember. But that was before Spock, before their friendship had evolved into a special bond of love and understanding. It was a selfish thought, yet he wondered what this moment would be like without Spock. It was bad enough sitting here, waiting for the inferno raging above their heads to collapse, but alone . . . totally unaware of where Spock was, going crazy with worry. . . . At least, Heaven or Hell, they were together.

Inexplicably, a chill crept along Kirk's spine. He released Spock's shoulder and dropped his head onto his knees, winding his arms tightly around his legs. He began to shiver.

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"Ve're on de last lefel, Meester Scott," Chekov reported. "Dhere's noting Vait, I'm picking up someting." He paused, making adjustments on his instruments. "Life-form readings bearing zero-four-nine by two-eight-zero. One . . .Wulcanoid!. . .I tink."

"Well, is it or isn't it?" McCoy demanded, all but shouting as he leaned over the console.

"I'm not sure, sair. If et's Meester Spock, dhere's someting wrong with him. De readings are off a leetle. Dhere's a Human, too; also alive."

"It's gotta be them, Scotty!" McCoy said anxiously, yelling in his excitement.

Unconsciously Scott wiped his hands along the seams of his trousers. "Take it easy, Doctor. We'll know in a minute." He dialed the transporter beam into the proper coordinates. "Locking in now."

"Hurry, Meester Scott!" Chekov exclaimed. "De temperature is at de critical stage. Ve barely haf time before. . ."

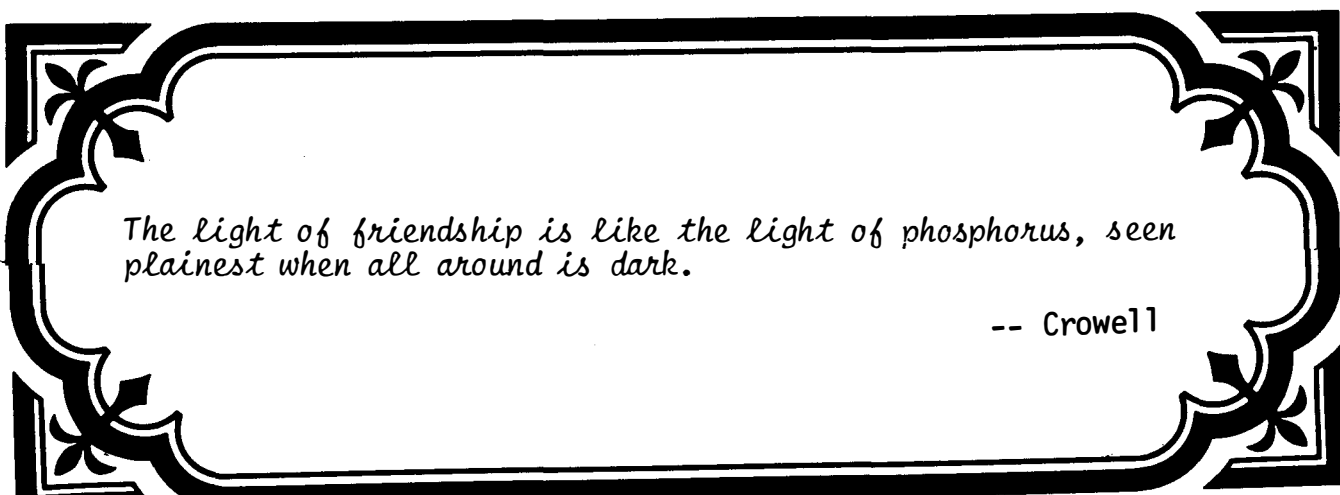
A tongue flickered over the engineer's lips, wetting them. There would be no chance for a second attempt. He slid the levers to the top of the console.

Suddenly clouds of smoke erupted from the transporter platform, sparks flashing. Scott's fingers flew hurriedly across the controls as Chekov's voice floated out of the intercom. "Et. . .just exploded, sair."

McCoy swallowed convulsively. "Did you. . ." His question went unfinished, hanging suspended like the smoke drifting slowly about the room.

His senses numbed, Scott stared sightlessly at the controls. "The. . .blast . . ." He gazed up at the doctor, a look of horror crumbling his face. ". . . only one. . ."

McCoy's eyes were riveted on Scott's trembling hand as it slid the levers downward. The familiar whine of the transporter screamed loudly in his ears, blotting out the denials his mind shrieked over and over. Try as he might, he could not turn around and face the lone shape solidifying on the transporter platform.



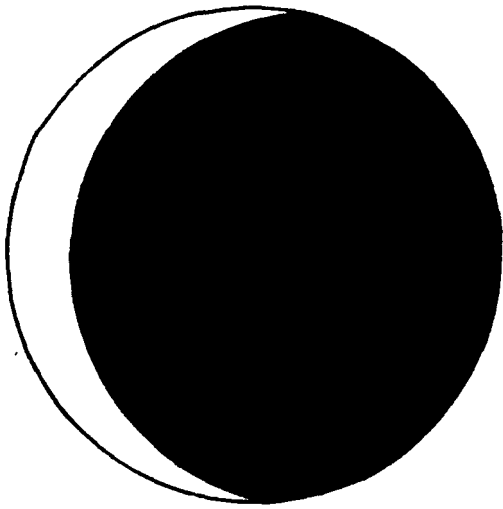
The light of friendship is like the light of phosphorus, seen plainest when all around is dark.

-- Crowell

In Between The Dark And The Light

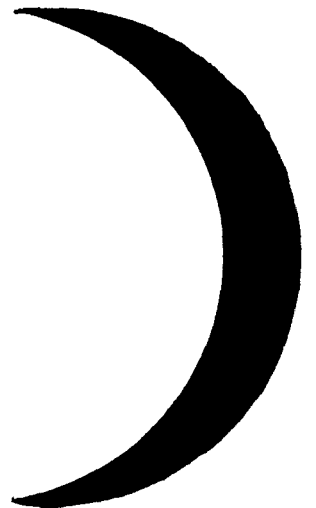
By Sandra Gent

Oh, I cry for you,
To have been so long in Darkness
... alone.
I, too, have felt the cold void
Which eats at my bodiless soul,
Sucking all hope from its marrow.



The darkness grows,
Black, icy, relentless claws
Reaching out for me.
"No!... No!"
A wail of anguish escapes my throat
Where I have none.
You're gone,
And only an instant
Have I shared with you!
"How long?" I scream
To those pitiless gods,
"How long must we endure Limbo?
How long before we meet in Paradise?"
They don't answer.
Love, they do not answer!
I would surely die,
But I'm dead already...
As you.

My tears begin to flow more freely,
Thanking whatever Fates have granted us
A brief respite.
You're here,
And I...
Hope rises again, and pain.
"Don't leave me," I beg,
Railing against the promise
Of a thousand dim tomorrows to come.
There is sorrow,
For I can't see you,
Your voice
Isn't as I remember it;
But your words fill me
With such surging emotion:
"I shall never leave you."
I can't touch you,
Yet it seems my hand
Caresses your cheek,
Flows over the sharp planes
And angles of your face.
Memories are born again;
I know I would bear
An eternity of Darkness
For this moment.
Your arms wrap around me,
Enfolding me;
If they are just dreams
Of our lost yesterdays,
I don't care.
I'm whole once more,
Here in your embrace,
At peace...



SHADOWRIDER

BY SUSAN K. JAMES

Flame, the center of life -- much needed, much revered. 'Lahav', the Urdan call it. And he who is suchly driven by a soaring force of life, a soul forged in flame, is known as Lahav among his people.

-- from GODLAWS OF THE URDANI

The horse broke into a furious run, its last run for unrestrained, unbound freedom. It would slow down soon, now, into the controlled gallop of obedience, become a useful servant and companion to the Urdan... useful and necessary, a reliable partner in work and war, but... not free anymore.

Lahav felt a familiar stab of pain inside him, much like the sorrow he always experienced when watching the last, smoking embers of a dying fire. He was a racer and horse trainer; he broke them and rode them -- the best, the most fiery ones of the choice wild horses brought in by the nomad Urdani tribes from the great plains. But every time he sensed that unmistakable change of pace, that subtle laxing of the strained back muscles under his tight-gripping thighs, an undecipherable sadness washed over him, like sour wine. He raised his head, his long, sandy hair blowing in the wind... Yes, the wind, the Mysterious One, waking in the cold snowbeds of the unreachable mountains to the west. The wind was free... wings unclipped, a never-to-be-tamed current, a breath of the Gods that spoke to him in so many-varied tongues. Harsh and howling, it would lash out with savage whips of fury when maddened by some unknown spirit, but it would also know the secret of cool-caressing breezes drying up the sweat-beads of a hard day's work from his brows; the comfort of gentle-soft whispers putting to ease his bone-tired mind. The wind was *his*... He'd had so many dreams about it, maybe remnants of a forgotten childhood? He didn't know. But in those dreams, he *was* the wind, roaming free, flying almighty between distant stars in stark, silent darkness, with just one, monotonous humming sound following him, surrounding him whatever heights he soared. He'd never recognized the sound, a constant companion of his dreams; no memory of his could ever claim it as its own. And in the mornings, he would often wake teary-eyed.

"He-ey!" The strong voice forced its way into his consciousness. "Friend Lahav, are you turning your horse's head back toward the stables?" It was Rea, a fellow trainer, a good friend and companion in many adventurous nights of wine, tall tales and women. He liked Rea and, more, he trusted him.

He wondered in passing if Rea would vote for him. The General Assembly of the Men was due to gather in one week's time, and a sizeable faction wanted him as Keeper. He'd always wanted to be the Keeper, ever since he'd remembered... how long was that?

"Friend Lahav, come, you could use a warm meal and warm bath... and maybe, too, a warm bed shared with that big-eyed brunette?" It was Rea again, but Lahav only waved his hand, signalling his desire to stay.

Yeah, Rea would vote for me, he thought with a chuckle. *He'd always think that the 'keeper' of big-eyed brunettes would do well as the 'Keeper' of the Sacred Horse.* He turned his stallion in an easy trot toward the rocks. He needed some time to be alone.

Reaching the great round-shaped rock -- his favorite spot for quiet meditation -- he jumped off his mount in one swift motion and lay, stomach down, on the sun-warmed, smooth-surfaced stone. His eyes lazily followed the weather-carved lines and cracks -- wrinkles, he thought, like on the age-plowed face of Old Isa -- when the familiar order of things was disrupted. The grey tone was broken by patches of green, and as he observed it more closely, touching the color lightly with an exploring finger, it turned into a sticky liquid substance. Rising, he cautiously followed the track of telltale green. Eyes lowered to the ground, focused on the trail, he almost bumped into the still body of the Urdan. No -- correction, he warned himself with alarm as he took a second look at the prone figure -- this one was different, and surely was not one of his. Greenish complexion, lean, tall body, upcurved eyebrows -- the kind only certain women had -- and the strangest pointed ears. And his hair -- short and sleek and incredibly black. No Urdan had black hair. It seemed indecent, yet strangely appealing. His fingers were tempted to approach the black fur, touch it. Why did he feel that urge, he wondered, pulling back his hand.

The body was cool to the touch, but obviously alive, even though the spirit in it must have taken temporary leave. And... a shiver ran through his spine in the shock of the discovery: the green stuff oozed, clearly, from the head that lay uncomfortably still on the bare rock. What?!

He looked down on his own hands, scratched in the wild scramble, and noticed a few drops of blood. Red -- warm, red Urdan blood. He licked it absentmindedly, thinking incredulously -- could that green ooze be blood, too? But to carry life, it *had* to be red, like the color of the Karatan flower in full bloom. Everybody knew that.

The motionless body suddenly stirred and the alien opened his eyes in one fast motion, the gleam of lucid reason returning to them with the moment of awakening. As his dark gaze locked into the hazel eyes searching his, he sat up, barely supporting himself with outstretched arms, and with a smile -- the strangest Lahav had ever seen -- announced in a voice of total joy:

"Jim! I have finally found you! Jim! Are you all right?"

Spock looked with disbelief at the slightly recoiling human. He freed one hand and placed it on the other's tense, retreating arm as he repeated, more slowly, "Jim, it's Spock. What is the matter? Are you harmed in any way?"

The human straightened his back, raised his chin in a way so heart-warmingly familiar to the Vulcan that it made him gulp, and declared in a clear voice: "My name is Lahav, of the tribe of Karnei-Esh, and I surely have never seen *you* before. What are you -- beast or being?"

Spock was stunned into silence, his Vulcan composure dissolving under the alienness of the words, the lack of recognition on the face. His eyes searched the man before him for a clue, an explanation. He seemed strong and in good health, his bronze, lean body dressed in raw leather breeches and jacket, his outfit adorned with a single pendant hanging from his neck: a horse-head, set against the image of the rising sun.

His appraising gaze continued its journey to the proudly raised head: square yet delicate chin, high cheekbones, softly curved lips, deep hazel eyes. And that gently pulsating vein on the tall forehead -- he'd known it so well... There was no mistake, no doubt at all. It was James T. Kirk of the Enterprise. His Captain...

Kirk had been missing for over eight months. He had been on a diplomatic mission when his shuttlecraft had disappeared in an uncharted sector of the galaxy. Spock, in temporary command, had been searching the planets of that star system ever since, without result. Finally, in orbit around the seventh unnamed planet, the ship's sensors picked up a metallic substance that in the computer analysis turned out to be the remains of a shuttlecraft, destroyed beyond recognition by an apparent crash. And five days ago, equipped with an implanted universal translator, a phaser and some food, water and medical supplies, Spock had beamed down to search for his friend. On his way, he encountered a band of natives, a noisy, disorganized group, demonstrating no logic in their erratic behavior; they had stoned him as if he were a wild animal. Injured and exhausted, he had crawled to the meager safety of the nearby hills and lost consciousness.

The human continued his suspicious vigil over him, close enough to survey him yet far away enough for retreat, if called for. A leatherclad stranger, a savage riding bareback on a wild horse... was he, indeed, his Kirk? There was only one way to find out.

Strange, strange creature, thought Lahav. *What should I do with him? If I take him back to the camp, the Friends will most certainly kill him -- a freak of nature, a bad omen, maybe even dangerous. I shouldn't...* His thought was cut short. The alien raised a hand, his fingers and thumb parted to form a triangle, as he murmured quietly: "Permit me this, Jim," and reached out.

Jim, Lahav repeated to himself. *What in the name of the Sun is this Jim?* But he had no time to follow up on it; the long pale fingers approached his head, attempting to touch his temple and face. He leaped back in horror, like a giant cat, striking out in blind fury at the offender. The blow, an automatic reflex of defense, hit the alien on the jaw and he fell back on hard rock, the conscious mind leaving his body again.

"Unforgiveable, totally unheard of and unforgiveable." Lahav was already on his feet, mounting the fidgeting horse in one stride and urging it to a fast gallop. "For a man to touch another man's head... it's the worst violation... He surely must be a beast of the wild, for no creature born to an Urdan woman would attempt such a brutal offense."

Fuming, pushing the nervous horse under him to its limits, he flew back to the camp. He left the horse with the stable-boy and entered his tent without joining the friendly chatting group of his peers.

He signalled only to his servant, pointing to the large wooden tub in the corner of his tent, and the man -- a silent, middle-aged giant crippled in one of the races -- filled it with steaming water. He submerged in the hot bath, his skin turning red under his furiously scrubbing hands, but his mind was away, back between the hills, and he could not wash away the memory of the creature left behind.

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His woman burned with desire under his skillful, inciting hands. Big-eyed. Brunette. And hot. As he impatiently pushed his legs between hers, her smooth thighs scorched his skin while her moist, snakelike tongue lazily traveled the path of his dry, sun-parched lips. He took her savagely, with little foreplay, thrusting his erect desire into her -- filling the cavernous, gaping hunger in her with his violent, desperate lust. As the power of his questions and doubts flowed into the forceful pulsing of their lovemaking, he could feel his organ ripping through her in a mad race -- more of blood and death than of love and life. The pain tore a tortured cry from her, negated only by a glimpse of insane pleasure in her eyes, and the open lips approached his neck as her shiny white teeth sunk into his flesh. With the force of surprised pain he threw her weight off his body, unfulfilled, rolled off the bed and ran out. In a few minutes he returned, put on some clothes and packed some food and drinking water. His gaze fell on the woman, still lying like a crumpled pile of rags on the floor, quietly whimpering. The low-light of the oil lamp was reflected in her eyes, silhouetting the soft curves of her figure -- and he felt a moment of disgust, an almost physical revulsion: he'd often experienced it in the aftermath. Without giving her another look, he turned to leave. On his way he stopped



again, picked up a heavy, handwoven blanket, and then hurried out of the tent and disappeared into the night.

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Communicator gone. Phaser inoperative. Minor head injury. The Enterprise would check-in in 7.4 days. In case of failure to establish contact, emergency beam-up procedures will be in effect. Universal translator-implant in working condition. And Kirk -- alive, well and... totally oblivious to Spock's identity and his own. Brainwashed? Reprogrammed? Amnesiac?

The logical summary of the situation did not add up to a promising picture, as Spock sat on the dew-covered rocks, lightly shivering in the cold night air, weighing the components and searching for alternatives upon which to act. The drumbeat of hooves broke the silence, and the horse and rider, merged into the image of a Centaur in the misty moonlight, rapidly approached his hiding place. A bare-chested barbarian, uninhibited, unrestrained freedom written over his long, flying hair, thoughtful face and straight-spined body -- it was Kirk. He leapt off the black stallion, both feet meeting the ground simultaneously and bent over Spock with a worried look.

"You are alive. Here -- some food, water. And a blanket. Take it, you seem to much suffer from the cold." He paused, eyes narrowing. "What are you? Where are you from?"

Spock almost smiled, in spite of all his misery. This primitive, half-naked stranger was Kirk, without any doubt. Practical, decisive, intelligent. And curious -- humanly, delightfully curious...

"Jim, you do not...?" No, Spock thought to himself, it was pointless. Kirk did not remember him, he was obviously suffering from some kind of amnesia. "I am called Spock, and I am from a ship far -- very far away. But in many ways, I am just like you." He decided to change his tactics. "And who are you?"

Kirk's head shot up in apparent pride. "I am Lahav, racer and trainer in the tradition of Karnei Esh... and soon, maybe even 'the Keeper of the Sacred Horse,' now that the old one died. I'll know in a week's time." He paused for a moment, his hazel gaze flaring with a hidden fire, then continued, "I can break any horse -- the newly captive wild ones, the mishandled bitter ones, the independent ones with the best spirit for fight. And I win -- any race I enter, I win." There was a glimmer in his eyes, a look of determination on his face as he spoke. Kirk, the achiever. Always. Everywhere.

"How did you get here?" The moment passed, and suspicion returned into Kirk's eyes. The question was direct, the look searching, and Spock knew there was no way out of it. It had to be answered. He did some very fast thinking -- his fate, and the other's, depended on the right answer.

"I am a messenger -- I have been sent here. My mission and my ways are secret..." and he waited for the anticipated outburst from the intensely listening human.

"I'll accept no secrets. I want an explanation -- *demand* it!" The soft voice carried in it now the steel-edge of command. "I have saved you -- I might yet change my mind." This man, with all his compassion, could be dangerous.

"A satisfactory explanation will be given, but only to 'the Keeper of the Sacred Horse' -- the rest shall come at his discretion. Can you lead me to him?"

Kirk remained silent, thoughtful. Suspicion was still with him. There was no 'Keeper' as of now, he had said so himself a few minutes ago. But that would mean... No, nobody could think that fast to make up such a convenient story, especially not this weak, green-blooded freak of nature. He'd wait -- in one week he'd know the truth...

His thoughts were cut off abruptly by a sound, subdued but effective -- a moan. The stranger was holding his head, fingers touching the wound on his temple, his face distorted by apparent pain. Kirk jumped to his feet, questions and doubts forgotten, and forcefully pushed the other down to a lying position, covering his shivering body with the blanket. He looked around, surveying the barren surroundings, and then took off his vest, folded it and tucked it under the other's head for support.

... A fire. He'd have to start a fire, to stop the stranger's pitiful, continuous shivering. There were some dry branches and horse chips around, and he settled into the laborious task of setting a fire.

Spock watched him from the corners of his eyes. His guess was correct. But no, he corrected himself, it was not a guess, a whimsical hunch, it was as logical and scientific as anything he had done as Science Officer aboard the Enterprise. Human behavior was predictable -- he had said so himself in that long-ago courtmartial, defending his Captain's honor and career. Compassion, response to another's need, were as natural to Kirk as breathing air; it was part of his personality -- a unique, endearing part. And Spock's plan depended on it ... *Kirk* knew that Vulcans do not show pain and discomfort externally -- *Lahav* did not!

His purpose was clear. He had to remain close to Kirk and wait for the emergency beam-up, 7.2 days away. It would be the hardest countdown of his life, with Kirk's volatile nature only brought forth and reinforced by his new life -- and with the unfriendly, violent curiosity of the Urdan. But he had to stay alive, free and with Kirk. He gave mental emphasis to his train of thought with an audible groan, noting with satisfaction its immediate effect on the human. No doubt Vulcans could bluff...

There was something unsettling about the green, still-oozing blood mingling with beads of sweat -- at least the alien did sweat, though, like anyone else... and hurt, too. He was in obvious pain, and Lahav wiped his own forehead unhappily as he listened to the repeated moans. The alien lay silent, unmoving, only his closed eyelids fluttering once in a while -- cold, dark eyes surveying the surroundings for a minute, then closing again in apparent exhaustion.

Pacing nervously around the fire, Lahav weighed his alternatives.

He could not take the other back to camp; it would surely mean a death sentence. He could not leave him alone out in the desert, for his untreated wound, the heat and exposure would just as surely kill him.

He searched in growing frustration for another way, all the while avoiding a nagging, repeated question in the back of his mind: Why, why did he do this, why did he care?

The man was an alien. Not even a man -- for all Lahav knew, he might be an evil spirit, an enemy to the Urdan. To kill him would be the right way -- the only way -- required by tradition, dictated by logic.

Logic? A quick smile lightened his face in passing. "Logic" had always been one of his favorite words; for some inexplicable reason he had always been fond of it. It had filled him, by association, with a feeling of warmth.

Kill him, then. With his own hand he could do it more mercifully than the stones and knives of the Friends, more swiftly than the heat of the desert.

The figure in front of him lay silent, trusting, limbs undefensively sprawled, palms turned up in the symbolic body language of surrender. And the face... A closed mask of the unknown, the secret of alien worlds locked behind it, yet each curve, each line and shadow offering a suggestion, posing a question, raising an eyebrow of inquiry. A face inciting curiosity and... what more?

Lahav stopped dead in his tracks. He knew why he had not killed, could not kill the other, defying his own logic and tradition, and the reason was not compassion. *He liked the alien.* For no reason, and from the moment he had first laid eyes on him, he had liked the other. He wanted to know more about him, unveil the secrets behind the mask. He wanted to make him his friend.

And share the loneliness.

The answer came to him as soft and easy as monsoon rainfalls, breaking with distant lightning and murmur-warm drops the dry spell of long summers. He would take the alien to Old Isa.

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The cave was large, its cavernous pathways disappearing into the dark, returning hollow echoes to his solitary footsteps. His walk was slower, heavier than usual, double-burdened by the alien's body resting prone between his arms.

There was a strange, by-now familiar feeling in the pit of his stomach, a nervous tightness tying into a knot every time he entered the cave, as if he were treading on sacred, secret ground and yet... and yet as if he were returning to the point of origin, of all beginnings. As if he had been born there.

Familiar smells and sights attacked his senses -- humid air pregnant with cold-touched moisture from the sweaty walls, a faint scent of half-rotting, strangely aromatic fern clinging to barren rock, dim-lit corners with shadowy cobwebs hanging in disarray and, with his approach, the increasingly overpowering smell of a drywood fire.

The fire drew Lahav's eyes, as if he were mesmerized. The fire -- center of all things, hungry tongues whispering undeciphered, sweet obscenities as they greedily cracked the doomed logs of has-been life; red hue reflecting in demonic dance on the damp walls, creeping uninvited into the dark corners of the large underground hall. The fire -- mirrored in the wide-open, unblinking eyes of its mistress and keeper, Old Isa.

The white, the iris, the pupils of her eyes were all colored purple by the everburning flames until, at last, it seemed as if she carried the fires with her, within her everywhere, slave and master melted into one. And its secret kept burning within her, slowly, surely, with the merciless certainty that was the essence of a savage nature, consuming even her.

Lahav greeted her with a silent bow of head. She was the only one he would honor in such a way, bound to do so not by tradition but by choice. He placed the alien in front of her and turned on his heels without a word. He was already at the throat of the big hall leading back into dim corridors when he paused, one bare arm raised in command.

"He is mine. Hurt, different, maybe mad. No one knows of him. Treat him. And remember -- *he is mine!*" The out-thrust hand curved, the palm turning up, and the arm of command was softened into a gesture of pleading. He knew that he, and his charge, were at the mercy of the witch woman.

Old Isa could be trusted. She was an Urdan, very much so, one with them yet different. She probably knew more about customs, cures and fairy-tales than any other of his clansmen; she cast spells, invoked spirits, and chanted magic incantations better than the rest of them. Yet, she had a mind of her own, lived as an outsider, keeping her own rules and counsel. She lived on the edge of the desert, in the caverns visited by no one but, as legend had it, the spirits of the dead. In many ways, symbolic as real, she lived on the edge of the world as it was known to the Urdan. And she never killed.

Lahav left, and as he rode his horse in a merciless gallop back to camp, for the first time that day he felt content. His charge was in good hands.

He shivered for a moment as he recalled the last sight of the stranger's figure lying listless on the cold stone -- a sacrificial offering in front of burning fires, burning-red eyes. His whip came down hard on the horse's flank as he drove away the sight violently. He wanted to sleep, dreamlessly, in his own tent.

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Spock followed her every movement with watchful predator's eyes. He did not know, but based on the general humanoid characteristics of the Urdan, he estimated that she was of rather advanced age. Yet she moved around with surprising agility, purpose, and an odd grace.

Spock experienced no discomfort and his head injury was negligibly minor, but he maintained his silence and the pretense of helplessness, at least until her next action. He had 7.1 days to initiate -- in the meantime he would only react. His life, in a shifting puzzle, had moved from Kirk's hands into the old woman's -- but Kirk obviously trusted her, and so would he.

The woman moved above him, her heavy musk scent invading his nostrils as she gently rolled him onto a blanket. Then, with a strength surprisingly disproportionate to gender and size,

she pulled him over to a dark alcove hidden in the shadows of the larger central cave. The alcove was occupied by only one object, and Spock's cat-eyes gave the dim contours a last survey of assessment. It was a sloped, flat device, resembling a table at first sight, and only on closer inspection did Spock discover that it was also a delicately done, stone-carved image. A man -- back straight, body flexed in total command, the rising sun forming a halo around his proudly raised head. There were intricate drawings, designs and scripts on the horizontally laid figure, but Spock could make no sense out of them.

She pulled his limp form onto the figure, his body matching inch for inch the head, torso and limbs of the carved image beneath him, and as she turned away he wondered idly if he was to become a sacrifice to some unknown god. But when she returned, she carried no weapons, only a look of thoughtful sympathy on her wrinkled, age-beaten face.

"We shall cure you, make you whole again. Miserable son of darkness -- the night has left its mark on you, her black hand-wheels running through your hair. How strange..." and she turned to a set of signs, her bent, cracked fingers fondling them in a caress. Spock could still hear her, but from what now sounded like a growing distance, her voice muffled, words slurred. "...fell on this earth -- did you, too, come from the sky? No, you must have been spawned by the cold currents of the ocean -- the mark of green waves is still on your skin. Poor little green frog, what will it be for you, what will it be..." Through the slurring, the voice rang with compassion. "Your mind is too different, disorderly -- insane, perhaps, as Lahav said. I can help your body, but not your mind, your soul. Poor little green frog..."

An aura of tranquility enveloped Spock in a warm embrace. He wanted to move, to protest, to get away -- to stop whatever it was that was about to happen to him. But a glowing light, in colors of warmth, transfixed him to the stone surface and he was unable to rise -- not his muscles paralyzed, but his will. A whirlpool of images passed through his mind in a crazed race of screaming protest, turning and speeding and sinking -- sinking into the black hole of his subconscious until there was nothing left but a pleasant, floating sensation of blank indifference.

The old, wrinkled hands continued their frenzied flirtation with the symbols on the board.

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He had a whole day's hard-driving work behind him before he returned to the caverns. His tense worry had inexplicably grown during the long hours, and by the time he dismounted his horse and rushed through winding tunnels into Old Isa's place he was ready to scream in shaking impatience. He found her settled before the fire, silent, meditative and -- alone. Peace on her face.

Kirk burst out with the question with unthinking urgency. "Where is he -- *where is my friend?*" Unvoiced was the suspicion: 'Is he dead?'

"Your *friend?*" she asked with knowing eyes, shifting the emphasis to the word so sparingly used by the horseman. "Silent, different friend you have, Lahav. I fear he could not be fully cured. The patterns do not fit. His mind is resistant, much distorted... and observant -- he wanted to know, to understand everything, look behind the secrets of the Gods."

"Blasphemous," he muttered, mechanically intoning the appropriate response expected of him. Then he added, his heart thumping in his throat, "*Where?*"

Her animal-clawed hand pointed toward the caverns in the distance. "At Three Rocks. I assumed you would want him to hide there. Tolerance runs low among the Friends. He is yours, Lahav -- I never laid my eyes on him." She had already turned, as if closing both the conversation and his presence out of her mind, but then she softly added, "Peace to you, my son."

He was already gone.

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The place, marked by three mammoth rocks giving it its name and distinction, lay in sleepy tranquility, disturbed only by the pounding sound of a fast-running horse echoing from the sun

warmed stone walls. The man calling himself Spock was outside, standing in the light, one shoulder leaning on a tree trunk, eyes closed. He seemed to be meditating, and for a moment Lahav kept silent, hesitant to break the circle of privacy surrounding the alien.

"You're well. It seems the Gods favored your life after all -- even though only *they* know their capricious reasons for that." He stopped, head slanted to the side, a mischievous half-grin lighting his face. "Tell me, though, is that color -- the subtle green glow -- natural to your race, or do you still suffer ill-effects?"

Spock returned a broad, open smile -- in front of Lahav he could allow it -- and his brown eyes reflected the teasing gleam of the hazel ones as he replied. "Unfortunately, this is indeed me, fully healthy and functional. My blood, as you have seen, contains elements different from yours, giving me -- and my entire... tribe -- a different complexion."

"Logical," the other nodded with conviction, and Spock, somewhat taken by such natural usurpation of his own trademark by the familiar barbarian, halted momentarily before he asked: "What are your plans for me?"

The sandy eyebrows furrowed in thought, the so-well-known worry line plowing the forehead as Lahav deliberated. "I guess you could stay here for a while. I'll come to see you daily if I can, bring you supplies... After the competitions, six sunrises away, things might change." Then, more decisively, he added, "We'll have to wait till after the competitions -- but that night will show the omen for your future and mine." A flat statement, linking their fates together once again.

He turned to leave (Spock had already learned of this habit of his to abruptly turn and leave, often in what seemed midsentence) and was spurring his horse to a gallop as he yelled back:

"The Gods have done their share and so have I, in saving your hide. Don't get into trouble, *friend* Spock, I'll be back!" The word, casual as it was said, warmed Spock as he remained alone in the sunset, with only the image of horse and rider mirrored in his eyes.

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Back in camp, sitting with his friends, Lahav felt alone, too. He paid little attention to the voices talking, shouting, joking, vying for attention in the rowdy circle of loud young men. He had trouble concentrating even on the quietly excited words of Rea, thinking out loud, more for his own benefit than Lahav's, about the upcoming festivities.

Lahav knew he should give it some thought. He was sure he would be among those elected by the people for the competitions, the five riders in whom the trust of the Urdan would pridefully rest. But he had yet to decide on a strategy to prove that of the five he was the best -- that he was, indeed, the Keeper of the Horse in a tribe of horsemen. And he was. He knew it at his core, with an almost arrogant inner self-assurance. But right now he wished that he could be back with the alien. Spock. What a strange name... strange man... *S-p-o-c-k*.

He left the circle and went to sleep. Alone. Only Rea's worried eyes and the knowing nods of the Friends followed his laconic departure. His impatient soul, they thought, was lost in the anxieties of the approaching day.

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The neighing of a horse woke him and for a disoriented moment the cave, the stone walls, the still-grey predawn air did not connect in his mind... but as he looked up, the strong tanned arms shaking him, the rested, smiling eyes did. Lahav. What had they done to Kirk to change his sleeping habits in such a drastic way? The Captain of the Enterprise would not have awakened at dawn, unless claxoned to life by a major attack by the entire Klingon fleet... and the Romulans, perhaps.

"Come."

The other pulled him impatiently, barely allowing him time to throw some clothing on his

frame. Lahav leaped onto the back of the waiting horse and signalled Spock to mount it behind him, while he held the fidgeting animal at bay. The two of them, bodies blended in the easy harmony of the ride, headed back from the rocky hills toward the yellow, frozen waves of the sandy plains.

The horse came to an abrupt halt, front feet skidding deep into sand, as Lahav pulled at the reins in one violent motion. They had stopped at a makeshift enclosure, a roughly rectangular fenced in structure, hastily set up of heavy wood planks. Inside, totally motionless, stood a horse. It could have been a statue of a horse for all Spock knew -- there was no movement, no pacing, not even a nervous blink or characteristic shake of the head. It did not even shift weight from leg to leg as most horses do; there was only a slight, barely noticeable tremor in the strong chest muscles betraying inner strain.

Spock stepped closer, intrigued, awaiting a response from the unnaturally still animal as he surveyed it with growing unease. It was exceptionally large in a bony, square way, proportioned like a heavy-set work horse yet not without a peculiar grace. It was no colt, but a fully grown stallion that carried the bruises and scars of many springs' battles for a mare. Its scarred perfection was in its power, not its beauty; the only adorning feature of its drab chestnut frame was the sandy colored, silky tail and mane. A long, white scar ran the length of its head from the starred forehead down the long Roman nose, setting the large, unblinking eyes apart in a sinister way, and Spock felt with a chill the dark gaze of one eye settling, observant, upon him. There was menace in the air.

"I would not advise you to go in." Even before he heard the echo of his own words in the chilly dawn air, Spock knew he had made a mistake as the warning turned to challenge in the brandy-pale glimmer of the other's defiant glare.

"I just bought him yesterday from the nomads of Tel-Eeve. Never been broken... The thieves -- they took fourteen *zehavs* for it, an unheard of price. But it had that something, that special look about it... the look of a fighter. I had to have it..." He paused, adding softly, "A fighter, to make me his master. On his back, I'll ride to win." His last words were punctuated by the sound of his feet landing inside the enclosure, and he began to approach the horse with steady, assured steps.

A strange, tight smile spread on his face -- the smile of the hunter readying for the kill -- and his tone altered to a slow whisper. "C'mon, my beauty, prepare for the match... There's none like you, you sleek-haired bastard of a beast... C'mon, let's play..." He approached, hand slowly raised toward the tensely listening animal's head. But he did not touch it. Instead, he began to circle the horse, walking on the balls of his feet in bouncing, dancing steps, closing the circle tighter with each completed round. And he kept talking in that low, soft whisper, as if trying to hypnotize the horse with the dance, the chant. "C'mon, Stonehooves, c'mon you sly son-of-a-bitch, don't stiffen up like dead in front of me. You and I, we'll make a team -- your days of roaming free are gone. As for your herd... I'll make you forget." The voice was soft, deceptively silky. "Wild stallion, your fighting days are over; no more biting, kicking, mating -- I'll fight you, feed you, love you. I'll ride your bony ass into the ground if I have to, but you'll learn the sweet taste of obedience. I'll make you race for me. Only me. C'mon, haughty stallion, eat out of my hand!" His hand finally straightened, moving smoothly toward the big head, and the hot air from the horse's wide nostrils bathed his face for a moment. Then, the desert's peace, the human's almost ceremonial moves, the Vulcan's breath-catching silence were shattered violently. The horse-statue came to life, transformed into pure energy in motion, muscles exploding in unrestrained action, hooves flying in precise, deadly revenge. It was as if the horse had magically multiplied itself -- its own image, negating the laws of physics and gravity, broke into prisms of a speed-born mirage, reflecting the nightmare of a herd of wild horses in attack.

Lahav's response was that of instinct, not of thought. He could not have retreated, run, or climbed the fence -- the black hooves would have aborted any attempt. Instead, with one leap he flew in the air, landing on the horse's bare back, his hands still holding on with a white-knuckled grip to the blond mane.

Violated for the first time, the horse responded with an outburst of brute force that shook the earth beneath its stomping feet. It broke out in sweat -- not of exhaustion but of foam-mouthed fury -- and there was a mad sparkle in the depths of its wide eyes as it rose, arching on its hind legs, trying to shake off its rider. For a moment longer Lahav held on, his thighs hugging the broad back, his bare heels digging into the sensitive flesh of the flanks, his fingers gripping the coarse mane, his entire body blending with the flying motion of his raging mount.

Rider and horse -- fire meeting fire. And Spock, as he ran toward them, free of the first immobility of panic, was stopped by what he saw on Lahav's face: a fierce smile, radiant with joy.

The next moment Lahav's body rose in a slow, graceful arch of aimless free flow, and then impacted hard on the ground in front of the deadly, flying hooves. And the horse, exposing a row of yellow teeth, gave forth with a long, mockingly high-pitched neigh of victory. Time was running out.

Spock leaped like a giant cat at the rearing animal, forcing it to pace back in surprise at his move. Leaving it no time for recovery, Spock's hands swiftly moved to the broad head, locking on the white star, coercing a response from the hazy mind fogged with primitive rage.

The contact was short, wordless, intense. Spock felt his mind flow through his fingers, forcing the barriers of fury and blood and the yearning to be free, overpowering them with his command.

It was a rape, and repugnant to him. Imposing his will with such elementary power left an unsavory mental aftertaste in his mind. The animal would never be the same. But it had to be done.

Consciousness returned to him with a swift jolt of urgency. He sat, still shaking his head to get rid of the groggy feeling and nausea in his brain. As he raised his eyes, the scene he saw made him dizzy again.

The stranger, seated with natural poise as if he were born there, rode Stonehooves calmly, in the easy trot of an experienced rider. After a moment he jumped off the horse, ran to Lahav and extended a hand to help him up, asking in naked concern:

"Are you all right, Ji... Lahav?"

A part of Lahav was soothed by the... familiarity?... of the question -- another part stiffened in fear at the fragment/memory that could not be.

He shrugged, growing queasy again and held on to the comfort of the other's supporting arm for a moment. His eyes returned, unbelieving, to the horse standing patiently in front of him as it lowered its square head and affectionately pushed its warm-wet nose against Lahav's clenched hand. Still stunned, he slowly mounted Stonehooves and threw a thoughtful look at the alien before he spurred the horse to prance ahead. The stranger... So curious, silent, different; yet often, for short moments, so alarmingly familiar... breaking that wild horse, passing the test of manhood... Lahav not only liked him -- the alien had earned his respect.

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The following days were full, diffused with sunshine from dawn to dusk, soaked with the sweat of hard driving work, complete with the unassuming company of the alien. They spent the long, rich days together in the eternal indifference of the desert, breaking in Stonehooves, training it to befit the Keeper. Lahav knew he had been right about the horse, with ingrained instinct and lifelong experience -- it was strong, agile, enduring, with an indomitable spirit never fully tamed, and an obsession, matching his own, to win. Since their first encounter that day in the desert, he had accepted Lahav's will and iron hand, but even that it had done with the dignity of shared oneness, not the compliance of bondage. It was as if the horse had understood and had merged the magnificent machine that was its body with the will and mind and muscle of its master. They became better together with every passing day, preparing in single-minded unity for a common end.

The horse behaved strangely, though, around the alien. It would raise its head, ears cocked, as if listening each time as the other approached, and would stand totally still, only a yellow flame of something akin to fear flickering in its eyes, as long as it felt the dark alien gaze resting on it.

Lahav often wondered about it, silently observant, but he explained it away by remembering the horse's turbulent past and its reins-shy love for untainted freedom.

He too now responded differently to the alien. He found himself talking to the other with an intimacy usually earned through the trust of years; with a trust born only of a camaraderie of countless battles fought side by side, lives in each other's hands. Yet... the homeless stranger had become his trusted companion, by his side at all times, as if... as if he had always been there, always would be... with him, Lahav felt whole, his restless spirit at peace at last.

Outwardly, though, he remained an Urdan -- wild, pagan, prideful in his will. A son of the desert born with reins in his hands, short on words, master of his destiny. Often he was rough with the stranger, reasserting the walls after each excursion into intimacy. He was Lahav's find, his property -- a ward he had saved for no logical reason, he knew -- and it gave him none of the privileges of equality. Lahav never even addressed him by his proper name.

Yet, in his thoughts, he called him Spock -- Friend Spock -- and the words gave him a chill.

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Spock sat alone at Three Rocks, at his side the dying fire, the unfinished meal. His hands absently played with the rough wooden chess figures while his mind was far away, following the riding image that had been swallowed by the evening mist.

Tomorrow was to be the day. Automatic beamup, locked on to his implanted transponder, planned as an emergency alternative in case no communication from him was received. His only chance to get back to the Enterprise -- Kirk's only chance to get back to his own world again. The only way, the only time...

... *King to Queen's level three... King to Queen... King to... Kirk... to...* It was amazing. His Vulcan mind, trained in the intricacies of logic, found it fascinating. Lahav possessed none of Kirk's thorough knowledge of the game of kings -- he had only gone so far as learning the basic moves. The four days had been short -- much too short for so many things. But the spirit of challenge, the mind behind the moves was the same. And still, as always, Kirk played to win. Spock had never been able to change him in that.

After tomorrow everything would be as it had been. Familiar, well-known, comfortably safe routines. His back would bend over his computer again in the long hours of their bridge shift, silently touched by that observant, penetrating pair of eyes, always there.

The man-shaped altar he had so carefully studied in the cave had given Spock the explanation, had held the answer. A cultural symbol, disguised in compliance with Urdan customs and beliefs, it was a sophisticated computer, left behind by some advanced race, perhaps even the Preservers he had encountered before. The Preservers -- they had made Kirk happy before, but Miramanee, maybe even in memory, was now dead.

The Urdan seemed a rather inventive race when it came to the plethora of activities to injure, kill and maim themselves. To preserve their civilization, their mysterious benefactors had constructed a bio-computer containing the physical and psychological ideal-types of the race -- not unlike biological blueprints for the species, adjustable by gender, size and age. The person placed on the altar-like platform underwent something akin to a healing trance, in a therapeutic-magnetic sphere reminiscent of Nomad's medical techniques. Kirk must have been injured when his shuttle had crashed...

Spock had carved the pawns, knights, castles and accompanying royalty from the light, wasted driftwood he had found in the dry riverbank of the wadi parting the desert. Once he had thought of it, he had worked on it all night, with a single-minded obsession. The figures were small, crude, the shapes barely recognizable. But the horses were different -- he had spent many hours carving the harder, darker scrub brush wood into the delicate forms of the horses. The delighted glimmer in Kirk's eyes had been, though, a more than satisfactory reward for bleeding fingers, broken blade.

... Injured, alone -- and Spock had not been there, as he should have been. The sweat, the blood, the long-ago pain had belonged to the alien land, the old witch woman -- and for a moment Spock felt a stab of jealousy course like fire through his veins. The pain, Kirk's

pain, should have been his. He was possessive even of that.

Old Isa must have found Kirk injured and placed him on the machine. Its program banks knew only the Urdani and, using it as the ideal of perfection, it had healed Kirk, mind and body -- erasing human memories, overriding Terran thought-patterns with Urdan cognitions, histories, beliefs. Kirk had emerged from the experience whole in body, Urdan in mind, reborn in a very literal sense. Kirk-Lahav. Transformed man.

Except he was not. Not transformed. He was still the same, without the knowledge of his Federation world, without the memories of James Kirk. Once back on the Enterprise he would have to be reprogrammed to release his own consciousness and memories which still existed, intact and uneroded, in the recesses of the subconscious mind. The good Doctor and his psychological know-how could be trusted.

Lahav was an exceptional student of chess, possessing a natural grasp of the game, a mind trained in the strategies of battle. One wondered if, indeed, it was only scientifically unsound human intuition that had awarded him with victory against his Vulcan opponent on the third day of his initiation into the game.

It was a beautiful planet. One could find happiness here.

Tomorrow he would take Kirk back to his world. But tomorrow was also to be Lahav's day.

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The sun climbed slowly, approaching only the first quartile of its horizon as Lahav set out on foot from the still-silent camp. He was not very used to walking -- a rider, he had almost become one with his horse. But the horse needed rest, this day most of all days. *His* day -- it would have to be.

His eyes wandered to the wide-open skies above, still colored by the splendor of a molten gold sunrise, and his fingers absently played with the haloed horsehead pendant around his neck. Sunhalo, horsehalo, herohalo -- he wanted to capture its flaming glory, mold it around his own figure. He wanted it so much -- the intensity of his desire was like a cutting pain in his insides, a cloud in his eyes.

Why did the Sungod make me so singlemindedly, obsessively striving? Always reaching for the stars, never knowing rest... In bitterness he kicked a stone on his way, only to wince as his bare toes impacted on hard rock. *Maybe it's true what Old Isa said -- I did fall from the sky and I strive to get back...*

He heard running steps tracing his, and saw a tall figure approaching, long hair flying in the run. It was Rea. Catching up, he fell in step with his friend Lahav, walking for a while speechless, sharing the silence.

"You are the best." Rea looked straight into his eyes, unblinking, making it into a statement of firm belief, not only of friendship.

"Kator thinks he is, too," Lahav answered in a teasing tone. "But thank you."

They headed back to the settlement. Lahav looked in on the calmly grazing horse, washed in the cool, refreshing water of the well, but refused the cheese and goat milk Rea solicitously offered.

The morning shadows grew shorter and people began to gather dressed in their ceremonial best, the cobwebs of sleep still in their eyes, the excitement of the day written on their clean-scrubbed faces. The men settled cross-legged in the inner circle, surrounded by the silently watching women excluded for their inferiority and the curiously listening adolescents denied a voice for their brevity of experience. Younger children ran around playing, shouting, tolerantly ignored. Even the stray dogs of the camp were drawn to the central clearing by the warmth, the commotion and the promise of good foraging after the feast.

Lahav, remaining at a proper distance in the outer circle, noticed Kator from the corners of his eyes, his muscular figure clad in the black-dyed skin of the mountain wolf; he must

have travelled long to trap it. Their eyes met, locked for a moment, and a predator's smile, matching his outfit, spread on Kator's broad, cunning face.

All men were equal before the gods. Following the process of nominations by the tribal elders, listened to in respectful silence by all, the men raised their hands -- strong, sun-burned, wind-blown hands of work, hardened by the reins of the rider, the bow of the hunter -- and voted. The voices of the old men, thinned out by age, did not tremble; the upshot arms of decision did not hesitate as the Urdani elected, one by one, the five men who were to compete for the highest honor of their people. And as Lahav met again Kator's ice-blue, arrogant gaze, sending and accepting challenge, the rest of the world around them faded: the elders, the excited crowd, the other competitors all disappeared into insignificance. Only the two of them were left, pitted against each other in a match of need and skill and will.

The circle of people began to loosen, breaking up into small groups of drinking men, gossiping women. Lahav escaped with a polite smile and a few noncommittal words the handshakes and shoulder-pats of wellwishers, and on Stonehooves' back sneaked out of camp. The horse needed the warm-up for the midday competition -- Lahav needed the company of the alien.

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His warped time-sense was an inaccuracy to be corrected. He had been away from the Enterprise long enough to follow the time set by the close, hot-burning star of the planet. But he had to recalibrate for the beamup, which was to take place at 14:30 shiptime -- twilight in the desert.

Kirk would come soon, as he had promised. And Spock would not let him return to the camp, would keep him close by force if necessary.

Kirk arrived followed by clouds of sand, and Spock stood up to welcome him, taking hold of Stonehooves' reins.

"Greetings, Lahav. From your expression I gather your morning went well."

"Your eyes are sharp, alien. Hope your tongue is as glib, your mind as sharp as well. By nightfall, the new Keeper will demand a reason for your being here." He was off the horse, affectionately rubbing its velvet nose as his eyes wandered to the distance.

"It's the day I've been waiting for, training for all my life," he continued. "And...I'm happy... I think I am. Yet, there's something wrong, missing, as if the pieces of my life won't quite fall in place." He paused, suddenly embarrassed for thinking aloud in front of the stranger, and he sheepishly added, "It must be the coming race. I've been bitten by the spirit of competition, more poisonous than the bite of the rabid jackals of the plains."

"Come with me. I know a way to set your mind at rest," Spock said.

A question, unasked, crossed Lahav's mind, but he followed the other into the dimly lit caverns. Spock was doing some very fast thinking while he proceeded ahead.

The meld. Yes, it would have to be the meld. Not to return Kirk's memory -- that would require a lengthy medical process -- but to keep him under control, safe and at arm's reach for the duration of the day.

He turned back toward the curious-eyed human following in his tracks. "May I touch you?"

"Where?" The question shot back in a flareup of doubt, and a shadow of suspicion crossed Lahav's face. But the large hands were already on their way, reaching for his head. The fingers touched his temples, but somehow extended beyond them, embracing like smooth, snakelike tentacles his will, his awareness. A red, bloody haze of madness descended upon him and, concentrating all his mental powers, he shook off the terrifyingly tempting breach of his mind, launching an attack at the same moment. His arms flew up with outward thrust, throwing off the alien's violating hands, and his entire body accelerated into the motions of offense. The alien was caught by surprise, visibly anxious to withdraw, to avoid the fight with the other. His arms, elbows raised, tried to protect his head and face from Lahav's well-aimed blows, taking the brunt of the punishment as he retreated.

Lahav threw himself into the battle brawn and brain, intuitively calculating his steps,

enforcing them with his wilderness-steelled strength. But the source of his strength was neither thought nor muscle -- it was fueled by a burning fury of betrayal. *By this green-blooded freak, the helpless ward he had saved. His 'friend'.* This time, the word turned to bile in his mouth and he spat in disgust, but the bitter taste remained.

His fists landed hard on the other's backing body, hitting his face full-knuckled, pounding on the lean stomach, muscular chest. But the alien did not respond, did not defend himself. And this passive acceptance, unresponsive to the challenge, only incited Lahav's anger further. Stepping back, he charged again. The hazel of his eyes deepened into smoldering black as he leaped forward, his left leg kicking out midair. The impact hit the other full force in his chest and, folding over in pain, he fell. As he slowly raised his head, scrambling to his feet, a reflection of Lahav's fury spread over the angular features of his alien face. The two eyed each other for a moment like two fighting bulls in the ring, looking for soft spots, for a show of weakness in the deadly game. Then, as if their moves were synchronized, they both attacked. Flesh impacted on flesh, muscle strained against muscle; between them came the sounds of bones cracking, rushing blood, lungs fighting thirstily for air. For a moment in the wrestling they were held frozen in an awkward embrace, equally matched, the energy expended by each contained by the strength of the other. There was a strange determination in the alien's eyes, but Lahav's face was radiant with a fierce exuberance. He looked as if he were intoxicated by the heavy sounds of struggle, the rasping breaths, the smell of sweat reeking in the air -- and for a fleeting moment, peeking from behind the mask of noble savage, Spock thought he saw that Other's face. The wolf. A long-ago memory of Kirk's enemy within.

Spock's response was instinctive and immediate, bred into his blood by the violent ancestral heritage of a warrior race. He became the aggressor, his arms squeezing like steeled iron the other's ribcage until the breathing was arrested and a cry escaped Lahav's lips. Then he pushed the heaving, hurting body forcefully away and Lahav hurdled toward the wall, falling on the uneven stone floor of the cave.

Spock could hear the sickening sound of breaking bone -- like brittle, frost-bitten branches of a winter tree -- and the sound returned his sanity. And with it the fear.

He approached slowly, cautiously. Kirk seemed dazed, lying silent, eyes clouded in agony.

... The wolf had disappeared. And... it had never been an enemy; it had helped to find Spock, lead him out from among the shambles of his torn identity, initiated him into the meaning of care, compassion... friendship. Jim. Why did he have to hurt Lahav to save Jim?

They could not continue fighting until the beamup, hours away; the danger inherent in their mismatched strength was too great. He would have to render Kirk unconscious, to use the neck pinch.

He stepped closer to the prone body, bending forward, extending his hand gently. "Jim... Lahav, do not leave me. *Stay.*"

With the speed of a stalking wildcat, Lahav pulled up his knees and, collecting the remainder of his depleted strength, straightened them into the softness of the alien's bent body. His heels sank with merciless force into the solar plexus of the other and Spock collapsed with a muffled moan, both arms cradling his midriff in agony.

Lahav staggered to his feet, mounted his horse with difficulty, and with one last glance back hurriedly left the scene.

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He had been running all the way, for what seemed like an eternity. He was so short of breath his diaphragm ached with each strained intake of air. He felt his lungs would no longer support his muscle's need for oxygen, as he was running on sheer determination and despair. The unthinkable had happened -- he had lost Kirk. And what if he would not be able to find him before the beamup proceeded as scheduled?

He found the camp deserted and followed the sound of the crowd in the distance. The competition must have been underway. Unexpectedly, the place of combat opened up before him at the foot of the hill shielding the settlement. It was a large arena of hardbeaten, dry soil track in the shape of a horseshoe. Quite appropriate, Spock wryly noted. He slowed his steps in caution as he

approached, but he was in no danger -- all eyes were glued, as if hypnotized, to the events taking place in front of them.

Spock sized up with fast, expert eyes the field and the combat: the outer circle of the arena was arranged as a race track, similar to an obstacle course in which victory was measured by standards of speed, skill and endurance. His detached survey was interrupted by a sudden gasp rising from the crowd and, following their gazes, his eyes were drawn to the figures of the riders clearing one of the hurdles. There were only four left -- one of them must have already fallen victim to the race's cruel requirements -- and with a jolt he recognized Lahav's figure, leaning in an almost horizontal position on Stonehooves' outstretched neck. He passed first, his body merged into one with the horse, flying over the wooden barrier in a generously high arch of effortless strength. The multitude of voices rewarded the riders with loud applause as, following Lahav, Kator and a third rider crossed the hurdle, but hissed in despise as the fourth rider, in an abortive attempt, failed to clear the obstacle and fell. He scrambled to his feet and limped off the track unassisted, his horse wandering around for minutes confused before following the lead of its master.

The remaining contenders were coming up fast on the next test, with Lahav in the lead by several lengths. It was a barricade of rocks, simulating the harsh mountain terrain bordering the Urdani desert. The horses had to clear it in one massive leap -- falling on the rocks would have meant broken bones, hurt flesh for both mount and rider. Spock held his breath as Lahav approached the stony death trap, but it was only a moment as Stonehooves, with ease, flew over the hurdle in one elongated movement. The horse seemed different somehow, more fully alive than ever, its earthbound frame transformed in the grace of free, unchained flight.

Spock's eyes returned from horse to rider, and his sharp sight caught something that made him gasp. Lahav, now seated straight on Stonehooves, was slightly swaying, regaining his balance only by the grip of his thighs around the horse's bare back. He was holding his left side with the opposite hand, an expression of pain spreading on his face unchecked.

... The fall in the cave, during the fight... he must have been injured. And from the sound of cracking bones then, the sight of pain later, Spock's analytical mind was already in the process of a tentative medical assessment: most probably his friend had several broken ribs. A very painful injury; potentially life-threatening if the broken bones were to perforate the chest cavity and puncture the lungs... Cold medical words, logical diagnosis, realistic prognosis that even the good Doctor would not debate... Yet it was Kirk, his Captain, his best friend. And it was his fault, his instinctive pitting of unrestrained Vulcan strength against the more fragile, gallant vulnerability of his human opponent. What if during the strenuous physical tests of the race Kirk were to...? What if Spock could not get him back to the ship on time? What if his lungs were punctured, permanently damaged? What if he were to bleed to ... No, NO! 'What-if's' were not permitted, he would not entertain them, would not allow such thoughts to enter his mind -- as if the thought itself, by some supernatural power, could make the unthinkable happen. Besides, was not hope one of the many things he had learned from his human friend?

The horses, coats shiny with sweat, were coming up fast on the last leg of the barbaric test, and the crowd hushed into total silence as the flames of the fire-barrier flared up before them. Spock heard his own heartbeat, the heartbeat of the multitude pulsing as one, giant heart, in breathtaking anticipation. Tension hung tangibly in the air.

Lahav and Kator arrived before the fire together, their horses meeting head to head, mouths foaming, flanks shaking in exhaustion and excitement as they accelerated for the final sprint. Kator reached under the wolfskin, pulled out a whip -- forbidden in the games -- and with the fast, almost-invisible strike of the snake flailed it at Stonehooves. The horse, unaccustomed to the bite of the leather strip on his skin, broke stride and came to a moment's frozen halt at the fire's smoldering, ember-strewn edge. The sour, smoky air filled its nostrils as it raised its head and neighed. Then, with total determination, under the urging of its rider's spurring heels, it leaped. It was accompanied by a sigh, a gigantic whisper rising from the multitude transfixed by the scene. Lacking momentum, the horse did not gain enough height, and the figure seated on its back disappeared for a moment behind the deadly screen of smoke and flames. Then horse and rider emerged triumphant on the other side, followed by a tremendous, full-throated roar that rose like a force of nature from the crowd. Only then did Lahav turn around to realize that he was riding alone: the third competitor had never made the run for the last hurdle, and Kator -- Kator was only a screaming, scorching torch, half-man, half-flame, running unaided in the infield of the track. The same whiplash intended for Stonehooves had

scared his own horse midsprint, and it had thrown him into the hungry, waiting blaze.

Only one man had completed the test of fire, test of gods. *Karnei-Esh*, rays of fire, his people were called.

The Urdani had a new Keeper.

Lahav felt a strange lightness in his head. It must have been relief. He had won. Was that how victory tasted? Streaks of sweat running down his cheeks and forehead; angry-dense smoke blurring his eyes into unfocused teariness; and a faint, salty-iron taste in his mouth, on the bruised knuckles of his absently licked hand? Was that all there was to it?

Pain. There was also pain. In every tired, strained, abused inch of his body. But the ache seemed to be centered, as if the agony of each individual nerve-ending was drawn into one focus in his left side. Every breath for air brought a new wave of pain, sharper than the one before it, cutting through his insides like a searing blade.

The roar of the multitude swallowed him, threatening to drown him in the growing ecstasy of their loud, shrieking voices underlining the pounding in his head, the agony in his ribcage.

He dismounted and sudden dizziness washed over him. He had to hold on to Stonehooves' sweat-soaked mane as the horse stood protective and patient by his side. Through the haze of his own nausea the unruly throng of people mutated into a multiheaded monster, akin to the ones told and sang about in hushed-tones around the nightfires of the camp. It came, menacing, closer and closer until it cornered him into the loneliness of his own pain.

A wave of dry heaves shook his frame, and as his vision cleared he recognized the tribal elders approaching him. With great effort he straightened and, steadying his steps, followed them to the raised center of the U-shape. Stonehooves tracked him without hesitation, and no one dared to stop him on his way... the horse of the Keeper.

The carved image, emerging so imposing in front of him -- recognition cut through his side with pain as he sharply inhaled -- the erect figure, sunhalo around its raised head. It stood on the altar, stone features adorned with precious stones, painted in the rare alchemical color of sunrise mined from the bowels of the earth by life-risking adventurers.

The tribal priest approached him with reverence and led him up the steps. Reaching the statue, Lahav swayed again, his vision fading, but the older man by his side supported him with an understanding hand. The ceremony was indeed overwhelming, he knew, even for the hero of the day.

Shaky with old age, the priest removed Lahav's pendant, and Lahav felt a profound sorrow, as with all partings. The pendant had been a trustworthy friend, silent bearer of the horseman's most secret dreams. His fingers fondly followed the design for the last time before giving it up with a sigh to the other's waiting hand. Then the priest removed the golden shield from the godfigure, placing it on Lahav's still heaving chest. The people, surrounding the altar now in a tight circle, broke into a cry that shook the earth beneath their pounding, trampling feet. The festivities were about to begin

Lahav's fingers, orphaned of the familiar feel of his lost ornament, wandered to the heavy shield, tentatively exploring the new shapes. From the raised angles and curves of the armor the form of a horse emerged -- more detailed, more elaborate than any of the Urdani artifacts he had seen... The sacred symbol of his tribe; regal, proudnecked companion to gods -- *his* horse.

The sudden realization that it was his, really his, filled him with an intoxicating sense of power. Yet a dim cognition of uneasiness still hovered in his mind, an inexplicable taste of lingering bitterness. And as he raised both arms to the people in a gesture of joyful acceptance, with pain stabbing through him renewed, in the frame of his vision faces appeared, floated away -- faces of alien fascination, with slanted eyebrows, pointed ears... No, no, *not him!* He must be hallucinating... he would have to hold on to consciousness, at least for the



duration of the ceremony.

He willed himself to stand, holding onto the statue next to him, and shook his head to remove the treacherous sight before opening his eyes again. He raised his eyes, fighting the tide of nausea attacking him again, and he saw the alien -- an illusion all too real -- break through the inner ring of men, rushing toward him with single-minded purpose.

He saw the crowd, paralyzed for a second in shocked surprise, begin to follow the dark figure forging ahead, their hands fumbling impatiently with the knife-belts at their waists. Violence was all around him.

He had only one thought as he stepped forward -- *it had to be stopped, the alien had to be saved*. He caught sight of Rea, dagger drawn, rushing the approaching stranger and he raised his forebidding hand with all the authority of the Keeper's title and his own name.

"Stop! I claim my right to him. In the name of the gods, I command you to stop!" His voice was steel-edged with determination, but he felt the last words slurring, arrested by the sweet-metallic taste of his own blood choking in his throat, filling his mouth as the last fragments of consciousness slipped away.

The setting sun, in flames of molten gold, touched the horizon line.

With a giant leap, Spock made it up the steps and caught the crumpling body in his arms. Fourteen-thirty shiptime, sunset planet-time -- he knew the beamup was only seconds away. The Prime Directive... How could they be energized in front of the awestruck eyes of the Urdani? The Prime Directive should not be violated, except... it would have to be. There was no time left. The warmth of the limp, sweat and dirt clad body with a thin stream of bright blood trickling steadily from the pale-lipped mouth erased all logic, all duty from Spock's mind -- except one. The logic of his feelings, the duty to his friend. The Federation, its military rules and Starfleet ideology all dwarfed in importance -- Kirk had to be saved.

His supporting hold -- more like an embrace -- tightened and he looked down at the suddenly fragile-seeming, almost translucent face, the closed eyelids fluttering in unfelt pain. Lahav. A pagan sunworshipper, so far from Spock's world, so different. Yet Lahav had given him something Kirk could not have. Untied by obligations of command rank, requirements of good relations between Captain and First Officer, formal affirmation of his belief in their blending of differences, Lahav had chosen him as friend. Spock, as himself, for himself.

He felt the transporter tingle under his skin, a last frozen picture-frame of the Urdani closing in on him, daggers raised in their hands. As he pulled Kirk closer into the protective nest of his arms, the world sparkled into a starfall of nothingness around them in the transporter beam that caught them. He did not know if his last thought was of the joy of homecoming, or sorrow over a lost, newfound land.

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PERSONAL LOG -- Leonard McCoy, Chief Medical Officer recording:

James T. Kirk, Captain of the Enterprise, is back on duty again. Thanks to luck, that old ladyfriend of his, and to a First Officer with a very generous interpretation of loyalty. But this time it was a close call... and one of these days, he'll have a Humpty-Dumpty-fall, from which no one'll put him back together again.

Of course we did expect trouble following the emergency beamup -- God knows in those missions it's the rule, not the exception -- but we weren't quite prepared for that scene: Spock, half crazed, materializing with that ominously silent, blood and dirt covered body between his arms... A half-naked primitive, looking very much like Jim.

He almost died. Broken ribs, punctured left lung, massive internal bleeding. We had our work cut out for us in Intensive Care -- treating the shock, operating, administering the blood transfusions, hooking up the life support system... Sometimes I grow so weary of medical miracles. Can't trust them forever...

Worst of all were Jim's conscious moments, when he would lapse into uncontrollable attacks of rage. He was like a wild animal, caged, striking out in blind fury and fear. He was Lahav, Urdani horseman, and did not understand. "Kirk" was a strange name, the Enterprise a threatening, magical trap for him. He had no memory... except, it seemed, for the sounds of the ship itself. Somehow that low-humming, subliminal sound fascinated him, kept him tranquil, silently listening for long moments. The associates of the human mind are so interesting...

Each temperamental attack -- and Kirk could fight like a wildcat, even injured -- tore his wounds open, restarting the bleeding. And Spock, lingering around Sickbay like a shadow... his sight would trigger Kirk more than anything. Sickbay's supply of sedatives ran low by the time he was well enough for the psychotherapy to begin.

It's been four weeks since then, four long weeks of work and worry, no-night-no-day... the first free time I have alone to myself, just to sit and ramble idly.

Thanks to Spock's observations of that blasted mind-altering machine -- observations that were, of course, flawlessly accurate -- the layer of Urdani imprinting was removed from Kirk's mind, releasing the still-existing levels of his own memory. It didn't take too long before he was back to his normal psychological profile... even though he still wanders down to the Shuttle bay looking for his horse once in a while. But it is Kirk all right -- self-assured, assertive, compassionate underneath it. Wonder if Lahav was that different from Jim?

As his memory returned, so did a slow, gradual change in his attitude toward Spock, a renewed softness, a ready opening up to the other's need. But Spock... Spock was different. With Kirk getting better, Spock turned more introverted, more stiff and taciturn than he'd ever been, as if tormented by some inner guilt. Was he blaming himself for something that had happened on that planet? He won't tell, and I can't ask -- with me, he's still maintaining his Vulcan myth.

It's good to have Jim back... for the quiet drinks at the end of the day, the friendly talks, the stolen half-smiles, even the grudging bickering over what he calls my 'mothering'. Nothing has changed... run-down, lungs still scarred, ribs barely healed, but he already wants to solve the problems of the galaxy. By himself, singlehandedly.

Spock is getting better too, in his own slow and secretive way. The late night talks in Kirk's quarters must have helped -- Jim knows how to get through that thick Vulcan head of his. The chessboard is up again, and I hear much of impeccable Vulcan logic and stubborn human intuition, as a... command privilege. Indeed.

But the first time I saw Spock in what is tantamount to a good, hard Vulcan laugh -- read both eyebrows raised -- since their return was on the bridge when that Starfleet message came. A report from Lahav's planet, prepared by a special expedition to the land of the Urdani. Specific mission: fact-finding for the inquiry into Spock's disobedience of the Prime Directive. The party found no interference with local cultures, no reversals or acceleration of their natural pace of development. They did note, however, one unique feature of the people of Karnei-Esh. The desert tribe, it appears, has begun the worship of a new deity -- a horseman, one of theirs, who, as tales are told, departed from their midst in a cloud of fiery sparkles, born home in the arms of his dark-visaged messenger.

Jim is back. This time. And it's good to be called "Bones" again.



VULCAN LIES

By Shirley Passman

I am a Vulcan. There is no pain. There is no pain in the snow lit void, no pain in the dismal planet that took his life.

There is no pain in the ceremony we must attend tomorrow-- the ceremony where they will give him a medal he will never see -- a medal for dying. It is not logical. Uhura cried when she heard, but pain is not logical. It is a thing of the mind and can be banished by the mind. I am a Vulcan. There is no pain.

There is no pain in the memory of his grim face as he led the advance that held off the invaders just long enough for the Enterprise to get back, long enough for them to drive the Romulans back into the neutral zone, long enough for them to bring him home... long enough for me to bring him home... home to his ship to die. But there is no pain in the memory. I am a Vulcan.

There is no pain in the memory of his crushed, blood-stained body as I found him after the last attack. There is no pain in the memory of his hand reaching out to me, at the grey parody of his smile. I am not waiting for the sound of his laughter, listening for his footstep on the bridge. This is my chair now. He gave it to me. He... I am a Vulcan; there is no pain.

I can remember his face as McCoy bent uselessly over him. I can remember the way he looked at us both. I can remember the whispered, "Spock, take command." There is no pain in the memory. I can feel regret for the loss of a trained starship captain. I cannot feel grief. I am a Vulcan.

Tomorrow my shirt will wear his braid. Tomorrow, this ship is mine. Tomorrow my hand will not shake, my lip will not tremble. I do not feel what others feel. I could not acknowledge his friendship. I do not acknowledge his loss. I am a logical man. I know what is, what cannot be. I do not ask for that which cannot happen. I... I am a Vulcan.

It is not logical to wish that tomorrow will not come. I do not ask for reality to be finished. I do not feel what others feel. I am a Vulcan.

There... is... no... pain...

Separate Ways

I cannot think of losing you
To Fate's diverging path,
Too much has happened,
Too much shared,
And we have gained so much,
To change it now would bring a ghostly shadow of the past.
The past ~ Alone, in silent dark,
Without the stars,
Without the glow...

I was waiting.
So were you,
To find a mirrored heart,
Now found, now seen,
Now faced and understood.
Embracing thoughts
And echoed touch
Too brief before love's end.
Reality and time intrude...
Stars fall between our hands.

There are no words
That still the sweep of passing time.
Yet, if my thoughts reach far enough
And just one word repeat,
I will not think of separate ways,
But beg you, friend, to
Wait.

Martha J. Bonds



BUT UP TO NOW~~~

By Ginna LaCroix

Lt. Commander Montgomery Scott was staring at the doors which had just closed behind James Kirk. The air hung heavy with the words that the Captain had hurled at his First Officer. Scotty looked over at McCoy, but the doctor was staring at the polished surface of the table in front of him. The other occupants of the room were stunned, not believing what they had heard. Then, slowly, they began to disperse. A frown crossed Scotty's face as he thought about what had just occurred. He had seen Kirk in all kinds of situations before, but somehow this was different.

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The Enterprise had one hour and thirty-five minutes of power left. The crew was dying, their life forces slowly ebbing away, being drained by the space-amoeba. Each person was reacting in his own way -- each fighting a seemingly impossible battle. Scotty was still smarting after Kirk's reaction to his stupid statement.

"I *am* asking you, Mister. I need answers!"

Then the stimulants began. Kirk was pale when he arrived in Engineering, his face slightly flushed. But his command instincts had not deserted him. He was the one who had agreed with Spock that forward thrust could hold them more stable against the pull, although Scotty could see no sense in it. Each time Scott saw him after that, the Captain was more flushed -- in the briefing room, on the bridge after Spock had taken the shuttlecraft into the organism. Still he held firm. Kirk was the one who figured out that anti-matter could destroy the amoeba. Standing beside Kirk on the bridge, Scotty could feel the heat radiating from the feverish man whose mind was refusing to give in to the body's weakness, even though the stimulants were threatening to blast him apart. As he ran to the turbolift to get the magnetic bottle, he heard Kirk ask McCoy for another stimulant and Bones' angry protest.

Hold him together, prayed Scotty silently. Without him we're dead.

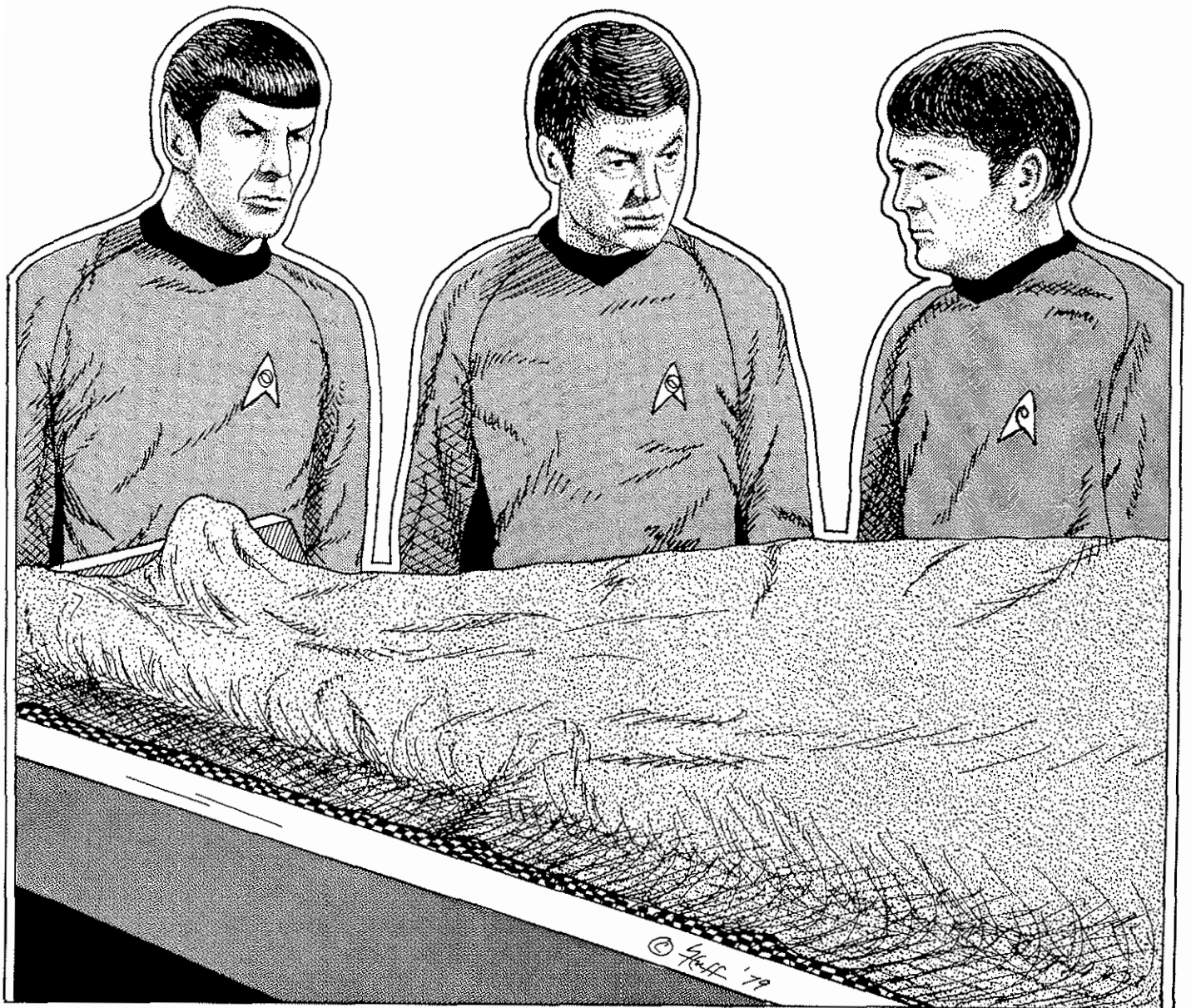
It wasn't until Spock was back aboard the Enterprise, after the organism had been destroyed, that Kirk had collapsed, drained and exhausted. Scotty and Spock helped McCoy take him to Sickbay. Lying on the bed, his face relaxed and the flush receding as the drugs broke the fever, the Captain looked ridiculously young. The three of them stood silently around him, no one saying what they were all thinking.

Finally McCoy looked at Spock. "He'll be all right after a good sleep. He was under a tremendous strain."

The Vulcan nodded, then looked at Scotty. "We should get back to the bridge, Mr. Scott."

Taking one last glance at the sleeping figure, Scotty turned to Spock. "Aye, he'll rest better knowing we're looking after things."

McCoy smiled slightly as the Vulcan and human walked out of Sickbay together, the truth of Scotty's statement striking home. He would indeed rest better. Exhausted, he sank down into a chair, one eye watching for any sign that his Captain might need him.



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The news swept through the ship -- the epidemic on the planet had been diagnosed -- Vegan choriomeningitis. It was raging out of control and the natives had had no means of acquiring immunization.

Then the call from Sulu -- the Captain was sick. He had said nothing, had been working tirelessly, then -- suddenly -- blinding headache, high fever, weakness. Spock had gone to get him. Scotty was in the transporter room when they materialized. The Captain was a limp form in the Vulcan's arms, his body refusing to function. But his mind was functioning and he was aware of what was happening.

It was a losing battle. His final order to Spock before he lost consciousness was to help the people on the planet. Scotty shook his head helplessly. Other people always came ahead of Kirk in the Captain's order of things. They were important -- he was not!

McCoy had been standing with Scotty in the transporter room, the untested serum ready. It was still experimental -- no data on success.

The entire crew was to be immunized. Scotty arrived late in the Sickbay. There was no one around. Kirk was lying on a bed in the isolation unit, his face flushed and damp, his hands limp on the covers, his breathing shallow and irregular. Even in his heavily drugged state he was in obvious pain.

"Scotty... "

He jumped -- the voice seemed to have come out of nowhere. McCoy was standing in the doorway. Taking a last look at Kirk, Scott followed McCoy into his office.

"Doctor, how... "

"I wish I knew. Not many recover from this. But, he's fighting -- just keep your fingers crossed. It's up to him now. If he doesn't let go he has a chance."

The next hours went slowly. The Enterprise remained circling the plague-ridden planet, her medical staff slowly winning the battle being waged on the surface. Scotty tried to keep himself busy in the Engineering department, but his thoughts kept returning to the sight of Kirk lying helplessly in Sickbay. Finally he could stand it no longer and went back.

Spock and McCoy were standing by the side of the bed as he entered unnoticed. McCoy's shoulders were slumped, but Scotty couldn't tell if it was in defeat or relief. Then their words carried to him.

"The fever's broken, Spock. He's going to make it."

Scotty saw the slender shoulders of the Vulcan slowly give, the tense muscles no longer able to hold the rigid pose. As he stood there, Kirk opened his eyes. He alone saw the engineer standing at the door, and he

was the only one to see Scotty raise a hand and slip quietly out. He returned to his engines knowing that everything was right with his world.

+++++++

The senior officers had been warned, but Scotty was still glowing. They had all thought the Captain dead. For the two months it had taken to get back to the planet, he had bitterly denounced Spock in his mind. Because of the Vulcan's unfeeling stubbornness, the warp engines had been completely burned out. Then Scotty was forced to nurse the impulse engines as they pounded along in high gear.

But, somehow, Spock and McCoy had found Kirk alive. He had signalled the ship, sounding as normal as ever -- and worried about the Enterprise. McCoy beamed up first and told Scotty what had happened, about Miramanee's death and the death of her unborn child. A short time later, Kirk and Spock beamed up together, the Captain still dressed in the buckskins which he had been wearing when they found him. Spock's face was a closed mask; no feature betrayed any feeling for what had happened. Kirk's face was ravaged by his grief -- his eyes filled with pain and still bright with tears. Scotty's heart went out to his young commander.

"Captain, I... "

Kirk looked at him and nodded, then walked out, Spock by his side. Scotty drew in a deep breath and quietly followed.

Time passed slowly. Heading for his quarters for a few hours of much needed sleep, Scotty was surprised to meet Kirk. The Captain seemed very unsteady on his feet and his face was pale and drawn, his eyes still filled with pain.

"Captain, can I help you?" asked Scotty with some concern.

Kirk looked a little hesitant, then said, "I'm trying to get drunk, Scotty. I've just gone through my supply of brandy, much to Spock's disapproval. Do you have... "

Scotty smiled gently. "That I do, sir. Come with me."

Putting a helping hand under Kirk's elbow, Scotty steered him to his quarters. Sitting him at his desk, he brought out a large bottle of rare old whiskey. He poured a generous helping for Kirk and winced to see it gulped down like water. Sighing quietly, he refilled the Captain's glass and poured a small amount for himself. They sat in silence for a few minutes, the young commander -- the older friend.

"She was beautiful, Scotty," said Kirk finally. "She was open, honest. proud -- and I killed her."

"Captain... "



She wanted to protect me -- and she gave her life for me. Her life, and our child's life." Kirk looked up, the tears in his eyes threatening to spill over. Scotty stood up and started toward him. Kirk stood up at the same time, but the combination of grief and alcohol proved too much. He fell forward, and Scotty just managed to catch him before he hit the floor. He was momentarily at a loss, then remembered that the Captain had been with Spock and that the Vulcan was probably frantically looking for him. His hand went to the intercom and the Vulcan arrived in seconds

"I had been gone from his cabin for only a few minutes, Mr. Scott. I had not expected him to leave. His condition was somewhat unstable...."

"Sometimes, Mr. Spock," broke in Scotty, "a man needs to drown memories -- especially those that are too painful to bear." He looked down at the unconscious man. "But in this case, I doubt if it helped."

+++++++

The woods were steaming, the great rain forest seemed to close in oppressively. The three men were soaking wet, as they had been for the past hour. They seemed to have walked for a hundred miles, although Spock said it had only been two. Scotty wanted to sink down and give up. But they had to get back to the beam down area -- the Captain's life depended on it.

Scotty sighed. He should have been the one attacked by the Wilderbird serpent; he shuddered as he mentally saw the fangs sink into Kirk's thigh. He had been the one to anger the Wilder leader, but Kirk took the responsibility and now the vicious poison was spreading through his body. Reports indicated that it was one of the worst deaths that could be experienced.

They had been thrown out into the rain forest to die, weapons and communicators taken. Their only hope was to get back to the beam down area; the planet's natural screens would prevent the Enterprise from finding them anywhere else. According to Spock, they had another hour of travel. Even then, it might be too late.

Kirk was weak and pale and now totally disoriented. He had insisted on walking himself, knowing the almost impossible task it would be to carry him. Now with the poison running its course, his legs continued to move, but without the support of Spock and Scotty he would have fallen.

Spock signalled a stop. They gently eased Kirk down against a tree. The pounding rain showed no sign of abating. Kirk slowly lost consciousness as he sat there. Spock did his best to put a dry dressing over the bite wounds, but it did little good. The leg was badly swollen and discolored. Spock's face hardened as he wrapped already sodden bandages around Kirk's thigh.

Wordlessly, they rose, Spock reaching down to pick Kirk up in his arms as easily as if he had been a rag doll.

"You lead the way, Mr. Scott -- set the best pace you can."

Scotty looked at the Vulcan, his arms holding the Captain, his face a total mask covering his feelings. He knew anything he said would be wrong, so he nodded and plunged off into the thick forest. There was no talking except for the occasional directional change from Spock.

As time passed, Kirk grew worse. He no longer lay limp in Spock's arms. His fever was rising rapidly, his face flushed and wet, and not only from the rain. He began to mutter and move restlessly, making Spock's progress difficult. The rest periods came more frequently as Spock tried unsuccessfully to still Kirk's feverish movements. As the poison spread and the pain and fever mounted, it was all the two of them could do to try to carry him.

Scotty was exhausted. Kirk was finally quiet but it had taken all of the engineer's strength to hold Kirk's legs while the Captain fought in his delirium. In desperation, Spock had applied the neck pinch.

"I wish you had done that earlier."

A cold stare met his thanks. "I could well have killed him, Mr. Scott. The venom of the Wilderbird serpent is an unknown quality. If it affects the nervous system as does the neck pinch, I may have just ended the Captain's life."

Scotty felt himself go cold. If Spock had just killed the Captain, how could the Vulcan ever live with himself -- and he was the cause. Badly shattered, he got up. Spock silently rose and again tenderly lifted Kirk.

With the now-still Captain in Spock's arms, they reached the beam down area. They were almost instantly picked up by the ship's sensors and beamed back aboard.

It was then that Kirk stopped breathing. When asked about it later, Scotty said he supposed he did, too. McCoy, knowing trouble had happened, had an emergency medical team in the transporter room.

Spock quickly but gently put Kirk on the waiting stretcher.

"Wilderbird venom, Doctor. I used the nerve pinch to control his delirium..."

"You what! Spock, you could have..." But McCoy didn't have time to spare berating the Vulcan. The portable cardio-stimulator was already in his hand.

Long moments passed before a heartbeat resumed and in those moments McCoy sent technicians running to the lab for antidotes.

Kirk started to thrash violently -- a quick sedative stopped him.

"Well, Spock, at least he survived your primitive attempt at practicing medicine." The voice sounded severe but both Spock and Scotty saw the relief and thanks shining out of McCoy's eyes. They had made it back in time -- Kirk would survive.

+++++++

The message had been false. The distress signal that had brought the Enterprise, as it had the other ships, was a trap. A trap planned by a madman.

Tarnell, he said his name was. He looked like a Klingon but did not wear the uniform of an Empire soldier. This was his planet, he told them, any life forms on it belonged to him, to deal with as he wished. And he proceeded to demonstrate his meaning.

A force field enveloped all of them, Orions, Tellerites, Humans, Vulcans, all equally helpless. Tarnell brought out a long, thin, wire-like blade. The Tellerite was released from the field and the others were given a hint of their fate. The limbs were severed from the body, the cries of agony sounding at every move. And all the while, Tarnell had laughed, a cold-blooded, maniacal laugh.

Then he had turned to Kirk who was standing, frozen, in the force field. Kirk was unable to hide his revulsion behind his command mask, his revulsion -- and his fear. Only a stupid man would not be afraid. He looked over at Spock and Scotty -- the Vulcan's face was a blank, Scotty's mirrored his own.

Suddenly, the force field was gone. Unprepared, Kirk collapsed. He saw the thin blade whipping down toward his leg -- the thin blade that could so neatly sever a limb from the body. He felt paralyzed. He knew his mind was frozen on the horrible images he had just seen -- he knew that primal terror was betraying him now -- and he knew his tormentor could also see it.

Something suddenly commanded him to move, to fight the numbing paralysis that had enveloped him. He flung himself sideways and kicked out with all the strength that was left to him. Tarnell went down with a crash.

Then he ran. His mind told him to get away from that place and take the alien with him. Spock and Scotty might be able to find a way of breaking free if he could borrow enough time for them.

But he had run as far as he was able to go -- his lungs were bursting, his legs getting heavier with each step. Tarnell had recovered quickly and was following him, showing no signs of faltering. His footsteps never varied, sounding louder as he closed the distance between them.

Kirk stumbled and fell, and his hands and knees, already badly scraped and bruised, cried out their protest. He could feel his heart pounding and knew it wasn't only from the exertion of flight.

He had failed. He couldn't get up. He slowly sat down and watched as Tarnell approached. He wouldn't -- couldn't -- fight any more. His throat went dry at the thought of what awaited him. He heard the whistle of the thin blade. His heart lurched and he shut his eyes as if to hold off the pain.

There was a scuffling noise, then the sound of something hitting the ground. He awaited the blow that never came. Then someone gently shook his shoulder.

"Captain?"

Scotty's voice. Opening his eyes, he saw his engineer kneeling in front of him. Spock was taking the blade out of the unconscious alien's hand.

Seeing the unspoken question, Spock walked over. "When you kicked Tarnell, Captain, the force field was broken, freeing both Mr. Scott and myself. We were momentarily stunned and had a little trouble catching up with you. You were moving somewhat faster than normal."

A slight smile crossed Kirk's face. "A small case of blind terror will often do that to a man, Mr. Spock. Adds wings to the feet." Seeing the Vulcan's puzzled expression, Kirk continued, "Never mind, I know it doesn't make any sense." Looking at Scotty, his smile widened. "I'll bet you just broke the undergraduate record for the quarter mile, Scotty."

"Aye, sir, I probably did. And it's not something I'd like to tackle again in a hurry."

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"Twenty-third century technology -- man's great achievements. Everything better, bigger, more efficient..." McCoy broke off, unable to bear his own pain, nor to see it reflected in the hazel eyes that looked at him. "Spock of all people... He's dying because of some idiotic bureaucrat who wanted the prototype of the Vulcan Natron Cruiser to be flown in Vulcan's honor by a Vulcan. Not properly tested, and it..."

"Bones, don't..."

McCoy frowned, and downed his drink.

Scotty came in quietly. The medical complex was huge and he had had some trouble locating the Captain. Kirk looked up as he entered. From his expression, Scotty knew the news was not good.

"Captain," he said gently, "you're needed on board. Starfleet wants a complete report immediately -- from the commanding officer."

Kirk steeled himself to answer in a normal voice. "Thank you, Mr. Scott."

As he rose, McCoy reached over and touched his arm. "He's got the best care, Jim."

"But, as you said, Bones, he's dying. All the care in the world isn't going to prevent that. And while he dies -- while my best friend dies -- I have to report to the bureaucrats." He turned abruptly and left.

Scotty looked at McCoy. "He needs support more than Mr. Spock, Doctor."

McCoy nodded. "And the only person who can give it is going to die, Scotty. How is the Captain going to survive that?"

Kirk managed to get through the endless questioning. He clung to rules and regulations, did not allow himself to think, to realize that he was talking about his friend.

And now it was over. He felt a hundred years old with the weight of the universe on his shoulders.

Then came the summons. Get down to the medical complex immediately. He must have looked like a wild man running through the corridors. McCoy met him at the door of intensive care.

"Jim... "

Kirk brushed him aside. "Bones, not now -- leave me alone with him. I don't want to see anyone." He shouldered his way through the door. McCoy and Scotty looked at each other, then peered through the glass in the door.

The Vulcan lay totally still, the machines by his bed whirring and clicking. Kirk could not tell if he was still breathing; there was no movement. Silently, he sat by the bed. He picked up a limp hand and held it to his face. He shut his eyes, desperately trying to control himself, but could not. Hot tears spilled over the Vulcan's hand and arm, dropping on the blanket below.

A weak voice interrupted his grief. "Jim, if you persist in your present action, you are apt to drown us both."

Kirk sat frozen for a moment, unable to believe his ears. Then he looked up. The familiar brown eyes were looking at him; pain showed in their depths, but they were seeing. A huge grin split Kirk's face, his joy visibly radiating around the room. He tried to speak but words wouldn't come.

Spock's fingers squeezed his hand. His eyes closed but the firm hand did not relax.

McCoy slapped Scotty on the back and they quietly left to get drunk.

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James T. Kirk had a temper. Everybody on the Enterprise knew it, although few had ever been confronted with it. The occasional smouldering look and snapped reprimand was normally all that surfaced.

But an explosion was imminent. And if the Captain didn't blow first, Scotty would. He looked across the engineering complex at Dr. Richard Daystrom crooning over his computer. The surprise attack was over -- the M5 had won. Scotty had heard about the 'Dunsel' incident and his heart ached for Kirk, even as his anger stirred against the tall scientist on the other side of the room.

Then a summons from the bridge. Leaving Mr. Harper to see to the engines, he arrived right on the heels of Kirk and McCoy. The Enterprise was out of control -- the M5 unit was going to destroy an ore ship. There was nothing he could do from there, and he left just as Daystrom arrived.

Kirk, Spock, and Daystrom arrived in Engineering shortly after Scotty. Kirk's eyes were grim, Daystrom was looking flustered. Suddenly, Kirk was flung across the room, flattened by a force field. Shaken, he let Spock help him to his feet. Scotty could see he was holding onto his temper by a thin thread. His words were sharp and bitter in his exchange with Daystrom. The man was trying to defend his computer, and Kirk was getting closer and closer to losing control.

Then Daystrom admitted that he had lost control of M5.

"Captain, I suggest we disconnect it at the source."

Kirk nodded, and Scotty called Mr. Harper. Together they signed Harper's death warrant. A beam of light shot across the room and connected to the main junction, Harper was in the way -- and died.

Scotty spun around, horrified. Kirk swung to face Daystrom, fists clenched, boiling mad. He didn't try to control his voice or his feelings.

"That wasn't a minor difficulty -- that wasn't a robot! That thing's murdered one of my crewmen and now you tell me you can't turn it off!"

At that moment, Scotty thought that Kirk could be capable of murder. He saw Spock take a step forward, his eyes glued on Kirk's face, ready to prevent the Captain from committing an act he would regret.

But then the Vulcan saw the unit had tapped into the matter-anti-matter reserves. Clear, logical thinking was needed. The cold fury died quickly in the face of necessity and Kirk was once again the commanding officer.



The relief was almost intolerable when the M5 was finally destroyed.

Scotty knew he would never forget the look of fury on Kirk's face as he confronted Daystrom and the machine that threatened to destroy the Enterprise. And he knew he never wanted to see it again.

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... Shaking himself back to reality, Scotty noticed that McCoy was no longer in the room. Spock was returning, along with some other crew members. Not feeling comfortable in the Vulcan's presence, not knowing what to say, Scotty stepped out into the corridor. He caught sight of McCoy standing a little way down from the door and moved toward him. McCoy looked up.

"Scotty... "

"Doctor." For a moment, he hesitated, not really sure in his own mind what he wanted to say. Then, taking a deep breath, he looked straight at McCoy.

"Doctor, I've seen the Captain feverish, sick, drunk, delirious, terrified, overjoyed, boiling mad -- but up to now I have never seen him red-faced with hysteria..."



*Now from night's gloom the glorious day breaks forth, and seems
to kindle from the setting stars.*

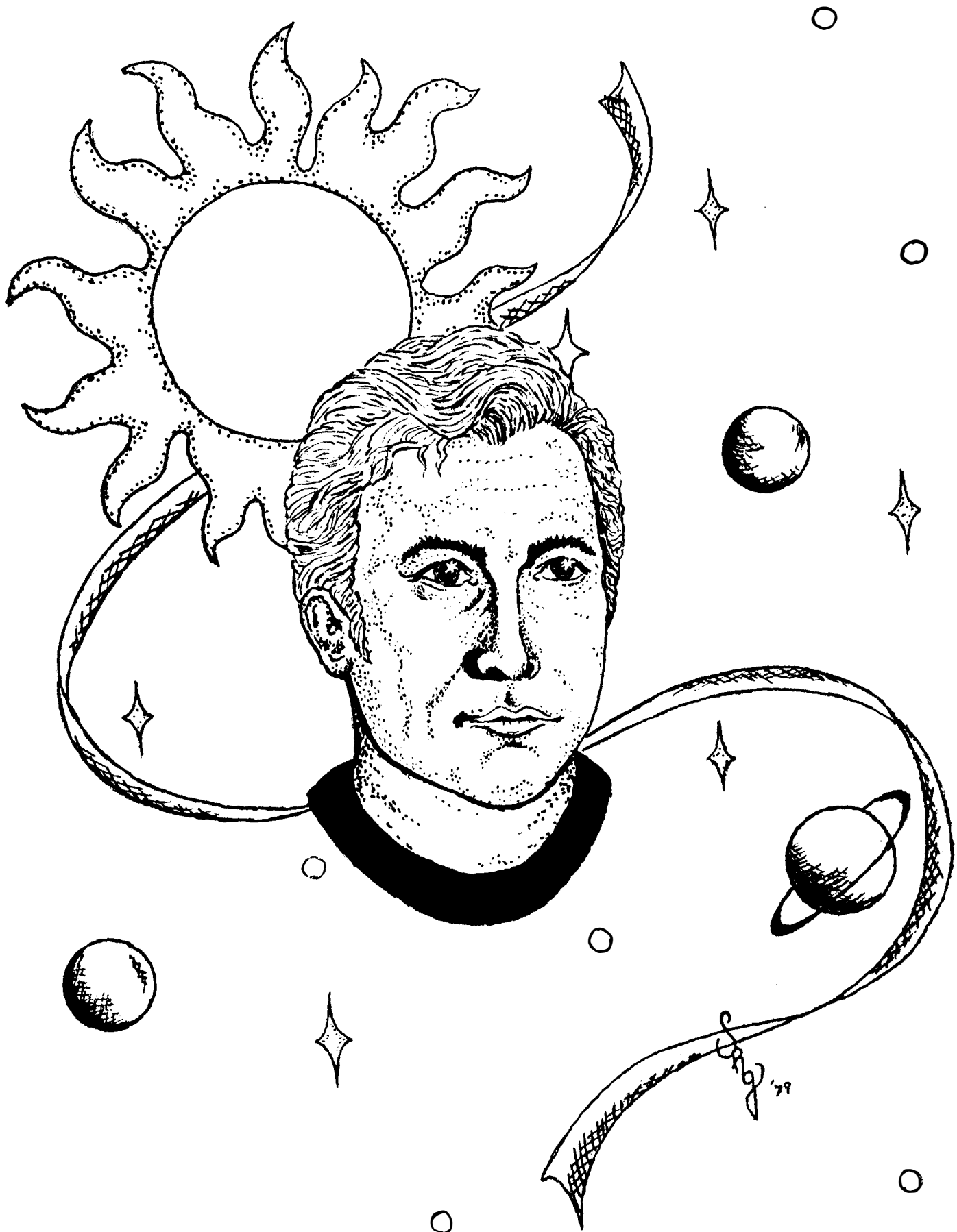
-- D. K. Lee



The Source

*As my eyes behold
The spectacular array
Of countless stars and worlds
That comprise the vast
And awesome universes,
I perceive One Star,
Closer, brighter than the others,
Providing life-sustaining forces,
Dispelling warmth and light,
And I understand that You
Are the Sun
Around which my world revolves.*

BEV VOLKER



LOOKIN' IN

I've never really understood just what it is between you two, though I've witnessed the subtle byplay that passes when you work together. The looks that touch, the tensions eased, the easy companionship when at play. And still I find it hard to define just what it is that binds you two.

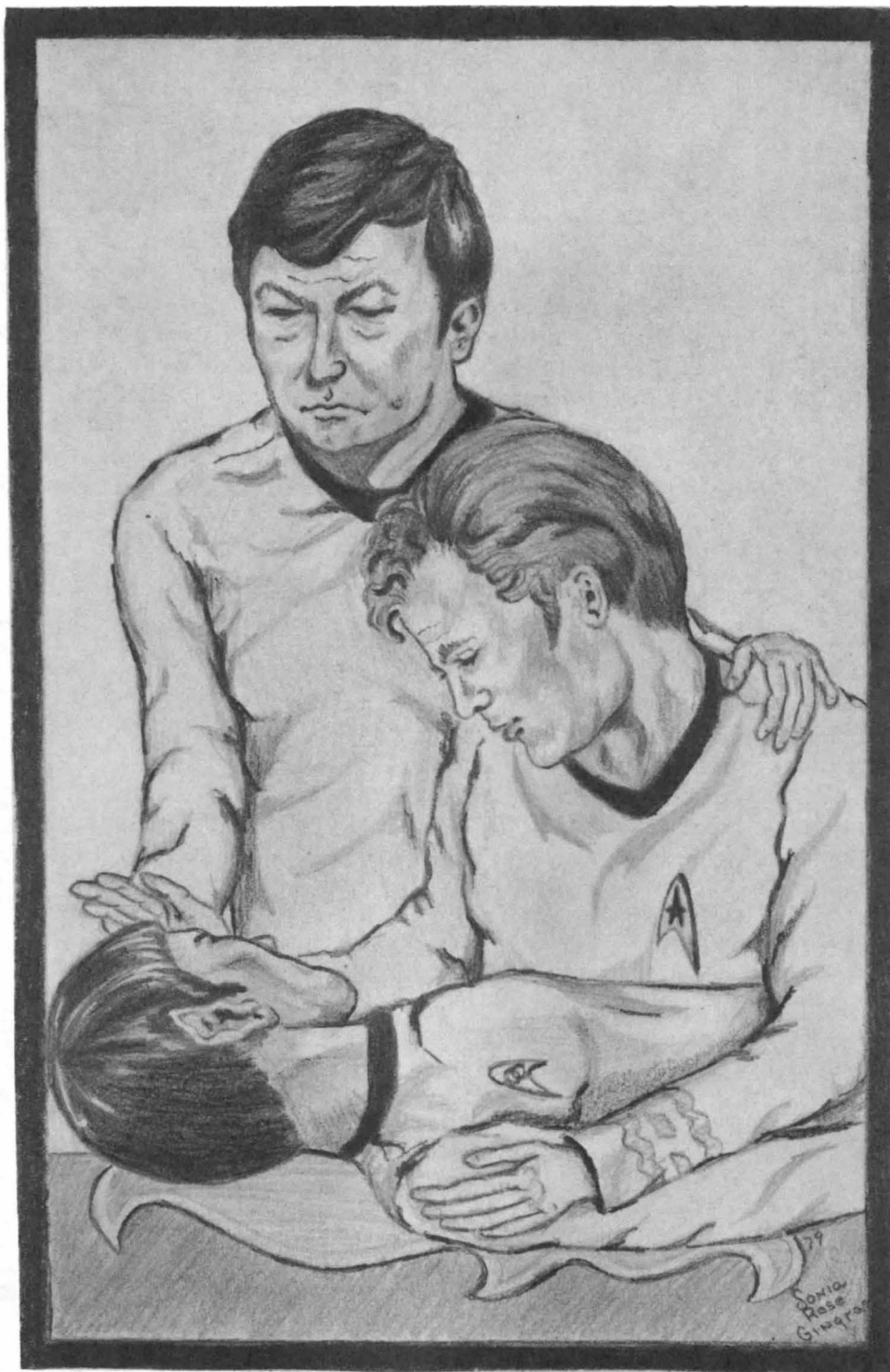
Love seems... such a meager word when you could know he was not dead that day in the Tholian sector. With hesitation, yes, even some jealousy, I've watched you slowly conquer the lonely man who is my friend. Unwittingly, you set up the challenge and dared him to bridge the cold, impregnable chasm that stretched between you. You set up an equation of non-emotion which he found unacceptable, and necessary to prove untrue. Undeniably, you managed to redirect his love to fill a void I could not reach.

I don't know who'd be most devastated if one should die before the other. For I've seen the anguish in his eye when you pursued the one-celled creature, knowing his command ordered your demise, the dead glassy look, tight-fisted determination, when you left to capture the Denevian invader, or the haunted worry he tried to hide when you were wounded on the planet Neural. And beneath the composure that's your disguise I've seen the eyes that follow him, I've witnessed the panic in your unmasked face when his fate lay unknown in Claudius's hand, the single-minded driving force that compelled you to learn the secrets of the obelisk on our race with death from the asteroid.

Gone are the days when I'd have jealously fought to keep him my friend alone, don't come between us, for he needs your love, as you do his, and me: I need you both.

Perhaps I should unselfishly hope for both your sakes, if disaster strikes, for you to go together as you've lived, for when that bond of love is broken, what comfort could I offer the living? What balm, what hope, to replace the loss? And though you share your lives with me, there's that secret place where none may come, And I can't help but realize, when I see the two of you together,
How lonely life can be.

Crystal Ann Taylor



Words by Beverly Volker



Future Lost

*Why are there no rainbows; only cloudy skies?
Why are there no starry nights dazzling for my eyes?
Why are there no silver dreams? Who has dimmed the lights?
Why is there no pot of gold on which to set my sights?
Why is there just misty blue; smoky whirls of gloom?
Broken hearts and promises cut down before they bloom!
Where have all tomorrows gone? When did visions die?
I have seen the future flown; when did Time pass by?
Once I had an aim in life; once I had a friend.
Together we would sail the stars; when did it all end?*

A Way of Life

*Something tells me in a dream that I'll touch a star!
Reachin' out can make it seem goals are not so far.
There's a voice that speaks to me in the sounds I hear,
Sayin' I'll be flyin' free when success is near!
Can it be? Can it be that the voice is you?
And your love is reachin' out, touchin' me,
Seein' me through.*

*All the stars I'm aimin' for, life and glitter hide.
Worlds and suns would turn no more without you at my side.
Now I know. Now I know that the love is you,
Sharin' dreams our future means, together we're
Seein' things through.*

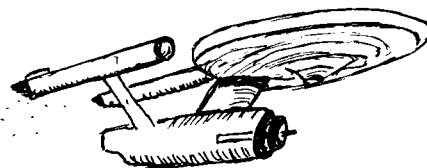
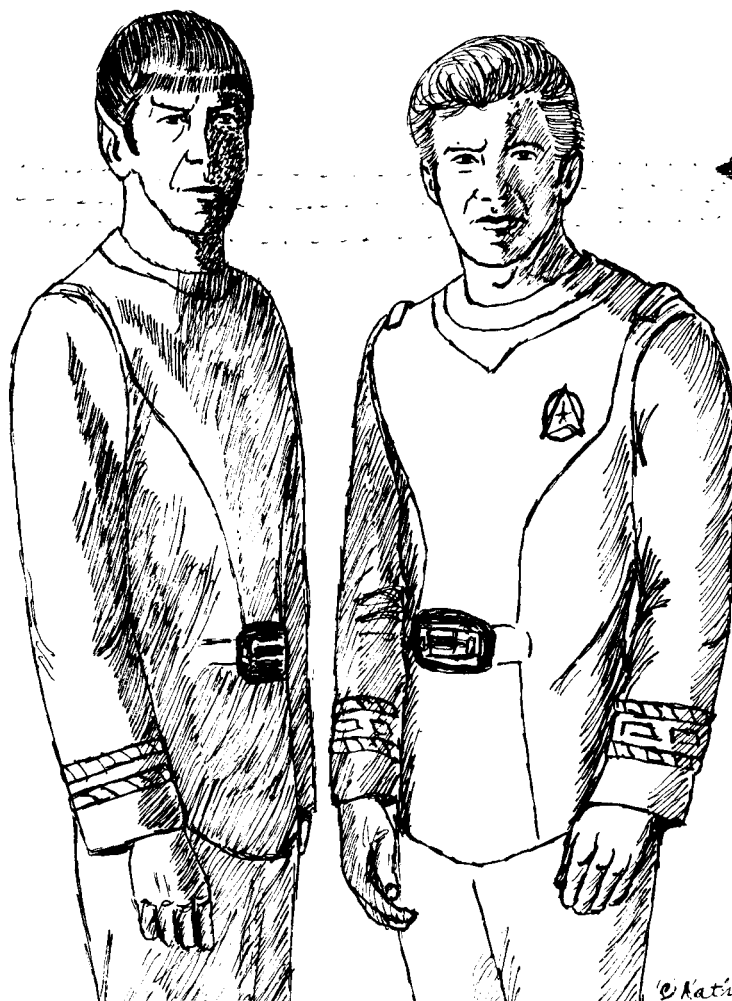


Music by Carolyn Venino

Performed by the Gemini People

Home Again

Yesterday was all we had; a dream we could remember.
Through the years, the good and bad, we kept a tiny ember.
In our hearts a vision grew, and that ember kept it burning.
All those years, somehow we knew the wheel of change was turning.
Now we'll hold on to our yesterday
And cherish the dream that's been fulfilled.
Sweet is the promise that shows the way
Of a heartbeat that would not be stilled!
All the stars will light the sky as home again we're heading.
And the hope that would not die has found a new beginning.
Now we've stepped back into yesterday
As though it were a moment ago.
All the years have melted away,
Lit by the fire of Tomorrow's glow!



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After The Flame

By Sibyl Hancock

He is dead. I killed him.

Jim...

Dead.

"Live long, T'Pau, and prosper." Spock raised his hand in the traditional salute.

Hold on. Do not falter. Not now. Not with all of Vulcan watching.

"Live long and prosper, Spock." T'Pau's voice, words slow, saddened.

Why did she not forbid? Why? I begged, pleaded. It is my fault he is dead. MY FAULT.

"I shall do neither. I have killed my Captain and my friend." Spock nearly choked on the last. Drawing a deep breath, he raised the communicator, vaguely gratified to see that his hand was steady.

"Energize."

He heard the hum, felt the moment of disorientation as the transporter disassembled his molecules and put them back together again aboard the Enterprise. He stepped off the transporter platform, nodding briefly to the crewman on duty, and made his way quickly into the hall. The sights and sounds of the ship were strange, unreal, and Spock felt more alien than he had in many years.

I don't belong here anymore. I have killed my Captain. Killed... Jim.

Spock winced. The emotional pressures were building, damming up behind his mental barriers. He could not cope with facing anyone now... the resentment, the accusing voices, the grief-stricken faces.

"Get your hands off him, Spock!" McCoy's words haunted him... cutting, hurting.

Spock ducked into the turbolift, craving solitude. "Deck five."

He was trembling, the muscles in his legs and arms knotting painfully. Pon farr had not vanished without leaving residual effects. His head whirled with the flames of dying fires, the sound of distant bells, and T'Pring's merciless voice.

T'Pring! Soulless creature! But for her Jim would be alive. No.
Spock shook his head. *Jim died by my hand. My hand.*

The lift doors whooshed open, and Spock concentrated on walking as unobtrusively as possible down the corridor. Only a few steps more; the doors slid aside and he was in his quarters. His legs gave way, and he sank to his knees, his breath coming in ragged gasps. He wanted to throw back his head and howl like a wild beast of the desert, keening mindlessly with only the harsh points of light in the night sky to hear.

"Jim... I am sorry," he moaned. "I did not mean to... I did not know who you were!"

How could he not have recognized that one face in all the universe? And now he would never see those hazel eyes sparkle with that special warmth that had been meant for him alone. Never again stand beside him on the bridge... or share...

He relived that wrenching moment his sanity returned, when he found Jim strangled, lifeless, dangling from the ahn-woon he held in his hand. Agony shrieked through him, turning hot blood to ice, breaking his heart in two. He had been frozen with horror, unable to move until McCoy pushed him aside. Wretched thing that he was... a misfit, unable to command even his own mind.

Why was I born a Vulcan!

Spock felt his throat closing, his heart throbbing with a dull ache. *I will not weep.* He bit his lip savagely, tasting blood, as a single tear escaped to roll down his cheek. Shuddering violently, he resisted the urge to fall to the floor and sob until he was too exhausted to think or feel. With effort he slowly regained control and was enveloped by a sudden calm, perhaps more frightening in its way than the turbulent emotions. He straightened his back and stood up, brushing away the errant tear. Grim resolve settled over his ravaged face, smoothing tension lines as the iron mask fell into place. He would instruct McCoy to handle the final arrangements, turn over command to Scott, then await their arrival at the nearest starbase.

Life is empty without you, my friend. I shall welcome its ending.

Spock squared his shoulders and set out for sickbay.



Jim

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After The Challenge

By Martha Bonds

At first, all he felt was a tingling numbness. He was groggy, as though he could not quite awaken. He tried to sit up, and felt a sharp stinging across his chest. Then he remembered. With one quick movement, Spock had slashed the blade of the lirpa through his tunic and drew blood. He stifled a moan as another wave of vertigo washed through him.

"Jim?" It was McCoy's voice. Kirk tried to sit up again, but the doctor pushed him back down, then pressed a hypo into his arm. "Take it easy, Jim. You're all right."

Kirk felt relieved as the stimulant took effect. At the same time, realization of where he was slammed into him. "Sickbay? Bones, what happened?"

McCoy averted his eyes for a moment. "This isn't easy to explain, Jim. I... just didn't know what else to do."

"Doctor," Kirk began, his voice low. "Tell me." His last memory, that of being strangled by the leather straps wielded by the Vulcan suddenly took on a new meaning.

McCoy swallowed, then plunged on. "That tri-ox compound, Captain... it was really a neural paralyzer. When Spock got that thing around your neck, you collapsed. He thinks he killed you."

Kirk just stared at the doctor. They remained silent for a moment, as the implications of McCoy's actions set in. "Well," Kirk said finally, "I guess I can't bawl you out for saving my life."

McCoy grinned. "My duty as a doctor, Captain." Then his eyes became serious again. "Besides, it wouldn't be easy on Spock if he had really murdered you. He might have been out of his head with that blood fever, trying to choke the life out of an enemy he didn't recognize, but he came back to his senses at the end. You should have seen his face."

"Where is he?" Kirk asked suddenly. "I don't want him thinking..."

"He'll be beaming up shortly. I'll wait for him."

Kirk changed into the fresh tunic McCoy had brought, easing back down on the diagnostic bed to think.

He didn't know me. The human kept repeating that thought, holding it as if to anchor his churning emotions. *He didn't know me. All he saw was*

a challenger, someone he had to kill before he could destroy him and take his woman... Kirk pressed his eyes shut against the demonic image of Spock's burning eyes.

He was driven by forces he couldn't control... The words Spock had used to explain the pon farr pounded dully in Kirk's mind. 'You humans have no conception.' No, but I had to find out, Kirk thought with chagrin. I was so complacent, so utterly human and noble, barging in where I had no right to go. Nearly wrecked both our lives.

'Are our ceremonies for outworlders?' T'Pol had asked.

'They are not outworlders. They are my friends.' It was his right, Spock had said, that his friends be included and he had pledged their behavior with his life.

Kirk remembered the look McCoy had shot him when they heard that statement. It was an echo of the warm moment shared in the turbolift when Spock had invited them. *'A brief ceremony... the male's closest friends... stand with me...'*

Friend. That word again. Spock had been using it a lot lately, and with a lot more freedom than he ever had before. Kirk had seen a new side to the Vulcan during this time, one he hadn't really known existed. He'd seen Spock torn emotionally, battling ancient drives and his own self-imposed privacy, recounting to Kirk a story that, by his own admission, wasn't even discussed among Vulcans. If that wasn't friendship...

Kirk let the image of Spock the man divided, the alien among humans, become uppermost in his mind, trying to forget the picture of the Vulcan possessed by madness. McCoy said he had come out of it at the end. *When he thought he'd killed me...*

What was he feeling now? Spock was capable of feeling -- he had opened up with Kirk, telling him painful truths about himself, tacitly asking for the help he so desperately needed. A strange mix of vulnerability and strength, his Vulcan friend. *Even Vulcans aren't indestructible...*

And if he was vulnerable emotionally before the challenge, what must Spock be going through now? The emotional shock coupled with the biological imbalances in his system could do anything. Would he sink into a pool of grief and guilt or, what might be worse, forcibly close the door to any expression of emotion? And could he possibly still feel friendship for the man who had so brazenly accepted the challenge?

Kirk heard the door to McCoy's office slide open. Spock had finally returned. How would he play the scene -- remorseful or coldly logical? Kirk listened intently, slipping off the bed and moving nearer the door.

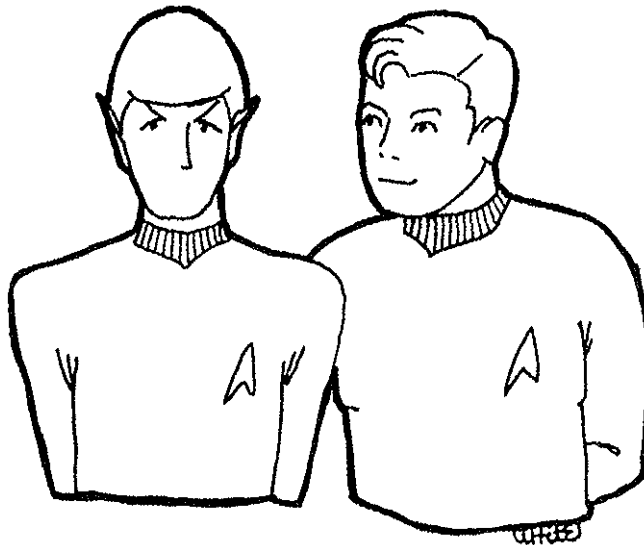
He wasn't letting McCoy get a word in. His speech was formal, precise, but to Kirk his desolation was obvious. Spock was admitting his guilt, asking McCoy to take over the funeral arrangements, telling the doctor he wished to be turned over to the authorities and that he would resign his commission. The tension in the room increased as Spock continued his speech, McCoy trying unsuccessfully to break in and Christine about to interrupt as well.

Kirk couldn't stand it any more. Putting on a smile to break the painful mood, he casually stepped out, asking, "Don't you think you'd better check with me first?"

It was all he had time to say. Spock looked dumbfounded for an instant, then grabbed Kirk and swung him around. Before he could stop himself, the Vulcan cried out exuberantly and his features relaxed into a smile that was joyous, relieved and unrestrained.

"Jim!" The name echoed and re-echoed in Kirk's mind, reinforced by the feel of Spock's hands gripping his arms. Spock was trying to regain his composure, covering his lapse with an explanation of his 'logical' relief that Starfleet had not lost a valuable officer. Yet the eyes that looked Kirk up and down in undisguised delight were warm with emotion.

They left McCoy sputtering to himself over Spock's display, falling into step together as they made their way back to the bridge. *Back to normal.* Kirk could play the game, now. No teasing would come from him on the subject of friendship after this. He had seen the depth of Spock's caring. That one, unashamed smile had been enough to put an end to all of Kirk's conflicting thoughts about the challenge, besides bridging what Spock had suffered as a result of it. They could go back to their posts with no tension between them, or need for discussion. Between such friends, some things could remain unspoken.



Sorrow's End

Alien

*Emotionless, cold
His logic leaves no room for laughter.
Less room for friends.*

*Held prisoner by his
Vulcan training,
The human half
Ever reaching to be free.*

*'Till shared dangers
And obligations
Reveal our need
For one another.*

*His wall is
breached. I reach
within to touch
his soul. He has
become one.*

*Whose depthless
eyes convey their
warmth when
most I need that sustenance.*

*Whose care is shown in quiet
ways of enduring loyalty and
selfless love.*

*Alien
Beloved Alien.*

Terran

*Brash, young, impetuous
Almost uncertain of his ability
To command this great ship.*

*Decisions not reached by reason and
logic alone but with a generous
sprinkling of human
caring.*

*'Till shared dangers
And obligations
Reveal our need
For one another.*

*His selfless giving
and love has
crumbled into dust
the carefully built
barrier I have
erected.*

*And my soul is
touched by warm
acceptance of me,
As I am, unchanged.*

*Permitting me to feel, to know of sorrow
joy, companionship, Love.*

*Terran
Beloved Terran.*



Jimmye Galli

Fires Of Yesterday

By Susan K. James

Gone with the wind, hard-blowing solar wind
Flying us, apart, toward new frontiers,
To deep space no man's wings have ever touched before;
Flying me toward, and away from memories of yesteryear gone long.

Duty calls, an iron master dressing its harsh drill-voice in
The gold-laced, triple-braided giftwrap of command;
Promotions, handshakes, rewards of recognition,
"You're a hero, James T." -- a praise that departure spells.

Decisions that are, or maybe should be simple,
Logically, Mister, fate (an anachronism) lays them out;
I follow my stars -- a new desert, a new continent, a new world to conquer,
(Behind them all the same wanderlust, the same never-ceasing drive.)

And you, parted from me -- so far, so unreachable --
Follow your call, on the beaten path of predecessors long dead;
Under stable stars of Vulcan's boiling-crimson skies
To unlock the secrets of the universe I find.

... A universe to find... didn't we, together,
Discover once that deepest, farthest, most hidden world of all?
I saw you, in your reserved, dignified solitude,
And you, willingly, shared the splendid, loud silences of mine.

Sharing of good times and bad ones, lived through in just a few years
that a lifetime made,
But now I'm lonely, so totally, so utterly alone as only those who had
had and lost can be;
And space spreads indifferent in its endless vastness between us cold,
Severing our once-oneness with dark, alien hands of void.

The viewscreen flickers, lights, a familiar face fills the small rectangle,
Limiting (the miser) the space and time I share with you,
And while your eyebrow rises, endearingly curious, with the hint of a smile
On the so-unaccustomed lips, I feel at home for moments fast-fleeting, short.

My friend, my Vulcan friend, it was good, could be good again;
Let's touch old fires with hesitant fingers of memory,
And let those fires of yesterday flare up and warm
The tomorrows coming so lonely, so cold...

Thou More Than A Brother

By Theresa Wright

Searing waves of agony crashed against his body, and he bent beneath their crushing blows. They held him immobile, dangling in their viselike grip, and he struggled vainly to be free. Years... eons... a hundred thousand eternities of hell passed before him, and still he fought to regain his senses. Pounding, throbbing sounds, reminiscent of the cadence of the Academy Band of so long ago, pulsed against his ears. They had an almost tranquilizing effect, and he relaxed against the onslaught, finally giving in completely to the forces that swept him along the soothing path.

Then suddenly he was conscious -- acutely aware of his new surroundings -- and confronting a reality more grotesque than any previous nightmare.

Gloomy night had descended. The all-encompassing blackness rested heavily on his optic senses and he was quickly aware of the smell. The foul stench hung in the air, a pungent, vaguely familiar scent that jerked his olfactory nerv-s awake and turned his stomach.

Nothing was visible. Blackness covered the area like an ebon blanket, stifling him with its smothering denseness. For one terrifying moment, he wondered if he'd gone blind, but a quick squint into the darkness brought the vaguest of outlines into focus: relief in the form of a hand, fingers outspread, held close to his eyes.

The pain was gone, but in its place was a frightening sequel, a nightmare for his newly-heightened senses. Touch, hearing, and most of all, smell, were suddenly honed and sharpened, as though already overcompensating for his lack of vision.

He examined his position and found himself to be lying prone on a damp, spongy surface. He struggled to move, managed to push himself shakily to his hands and knees. He hung there, wobbly and panting with the effort, fingers digging into the moist coolness of the floor. His hand scooped up a sample, and he sniffed at it, found it to be freshly-turned soil. But suddenly, the putrid odor was back, multiplied at this new, higher level, and he fought back an overwhelming urge to gag. He swallowed, vainly trying to keep last night's dinner in his stomach.

... but is it last night's...?

When the attack of nausea had subsided, questions began to form in his clouded brain.

Where am I? Where is this... this... whatever it is? Spock? Where are you?

His head pounded with a vengeance; his nose ran a steady stream of ominous liquid that tasted of salt and blood. He absently wiped at it with a grime-encrusted sleeve and began a slow, circular exploration of the area. He moved on all fours, allowing his sense of touch and smell to guide him and, with each completed circumference, he widened his range, leaving little clumps of damp soil to mark his progress in the dark. At the end of the fourth circle, his searching, digging fingers touched frozen flesh.

Even in the pitch blackness, his hands knew the feel of a corpse, and he recoiled in horror, instinctively pulling away, throwing his body backward and sprawling in a shaking heap. The smell was pervasive now, plowing deep furrows through his brain. He was assaulted by a dual attack of vertigo and nausea, and he gave in completely to both. This time he couldn't control the reflex urge to vomit; his insides contracted painfully again and again until finally he lay spent, his body still heaving spasmodically. He gagged once more, gasped out a whispered curse and drew his body into a semi-fetal position. Now he knew the reason for the sickening odor, and the knowledge made his skin crawl.

From somewhere in the misted blackness above, sinister droplets leaked down on him. They drenched his hair, his face, his uniform, turned the damp soil beneath him into sopping mud. He took no notice of them.

A corpse... here in this darkness... I'm alone with a corpse...

"SPOCK!!"

Again and again he screamed the name, and again and again the reverberations bounced mockingly around him. His breaths came in harsh, shuddering gasps, his stomach began to ache again, and he forced himself to lie still and listen to the ghostly sounds dwindle away. He listened, heard the naked desperation in his own voice and felt ashamed.

What was wrong with him, anyway? All his training at the Academy had prepared him for situations like this. Hell, he'd survived ten times worse. All those years as a starship captain had strengthened him, proven his courage time and time again. It wasn't logical for him to fall apart like this... it wasn't logical... logical... logic...

"Spock, where are you...?" The whispered words sprang from his lips just before the surrounding blackness reached down to claim him once more.

Hours passed (...or was it only minutes?...He couldn't be sure). Time had ceased to hold any meaning for him, and his bleak surroundings gave no visual clue to the steady march of the clock. Day or night; they both wore the same black robe. He sat up, noting that the darkness was still densely thick, seeming almost solid in places, and immediately regretted the act. The stench of decomposition was even more powerful than before. His stomach

lurched at the memory, but he managed to control it. He lay back down. At this level the smell was a little more bearable, but something had to be done. He couldn't even begin to hope to continue his search for a way out of here until that odor was covered up.

The thought led to an idea, and he groped in the darkness for his mounds of soil. He found them, counted out three and began to dig with his hands. He took short, sharp breaths and worked as quickly as his weakened condition and the stench would permit, allowing himself no rest period and focusing his mind on one thing -- dig! It became a litany, repeated over and over again in his mind, a whispered prayer with each handful of dirt excavated. Finally, he stopped and slumped heavily to his stomach, panting and gasping for breath. He began to crawl around the rim of the hole using his hand as a measuring device. It was long enough, he decided; it was wide enough, too. There was only to roll the body into the hole and cover it with enough dirt to stop the offensive odor. He tried for several minutes to orient himself in the darkness, failed and alternately decided to let his nose be his guide. It led him directly to the corpse.

This time he didn't flinch as he touched the cold skin. The body was rigid, slimy to the touch; it was also nude.

... probably dead for at least a week....

He pushed the body from its face-down position to its side, let it roll onto its back. Another complete rotation and it dropped with a muffled thud into the make-shift grave.

Kirk backed away, took several long breaths and then returned to his grisly task. He positioned himself like a dog covering up a treasured bone and began to paw at the ground. He heard the muted slaps of dirt as they struck the wet body.

Somewhere in the base of his brain, a nagging thought began to grow. Its seed had been there ever since the body's discovery, but he'd ignored it, choosing to deal with the environmental problem at hand and not speculate on vague and unpleasant possibilities. But this time it refused to go away; it grew and pulsed, finally shoving its way past his defensive barriers and the mindless urge to bury the faceless, nameless corpse. In the middle of shovelling another handful of dirt onto the body, he froze.

Sweat bathed his skin with a cold foreboding, and he shivered in the sweltering darkness. Some overpowering force was controlling him, driving him, and he obeyed the demand, bowing to the will of his unconscious brain.

He plopped back onto his belly and crawled to where he believed the middle of the grave to be. Hesitantly he let his hand dip into the hole. It touched only dirt, and a momentary relief washed over him. He took a quick gulp of air, held it and began to push the dirt aside. His efforts brought forth a frozen thigh.

Drops of perspiration ran in icy rivulets down his cheeks; he wiped them away. His invisible hand continued to remove the blanket of dirt from the body. A hairy male chest was exposed, then a neck, and finally a face and head. He touched the nose, noted absently that it was rather prominent. The eyes seemed to be very deep set; their vacant sockets were filled with dirt, and he skimmed

over them hurriedly, consciously avoiding the eyebrows. Then his hand touched the tip of a sharply pointed ear.

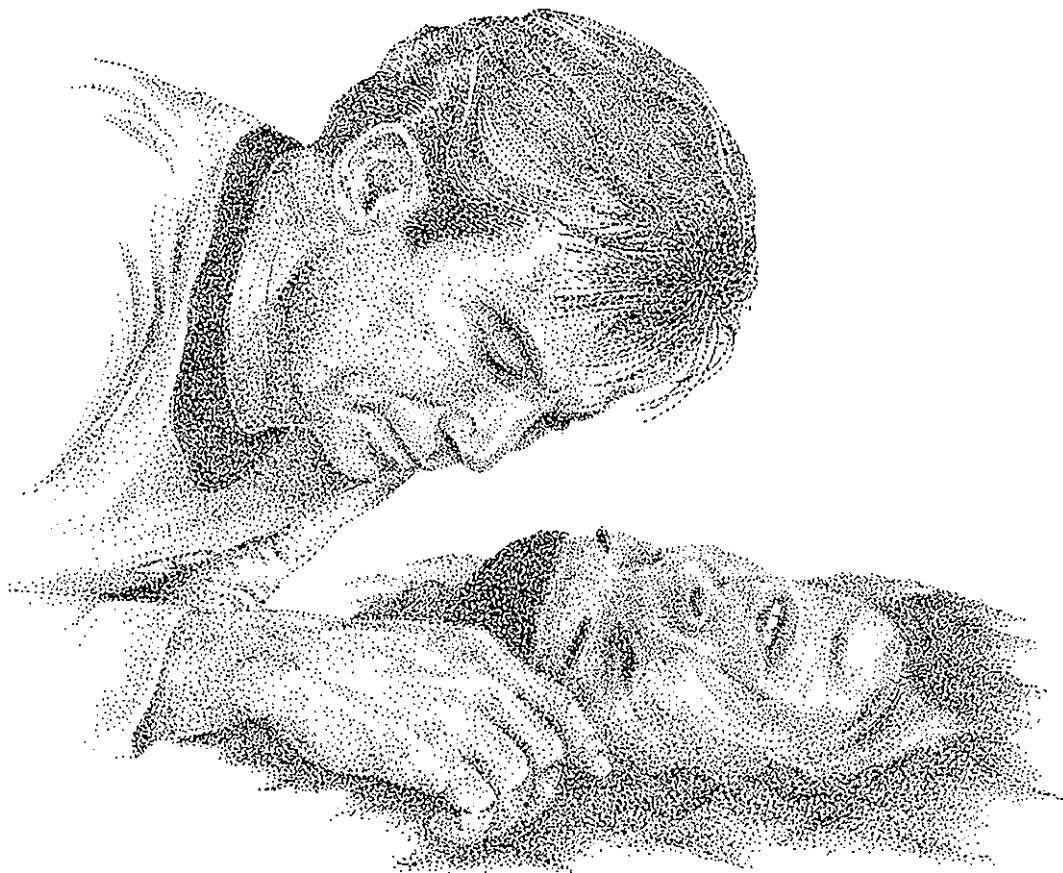
"NO!" His cry of disbelief echoed upward and cascaded back down, taunting him with a replay of his own voice screaming the word over and over. He sagged over the grave, his body suddenly limp with grief. Tears welled up and mingled with the sweat that slowly dropped into the final resting place of Spock.

"Spock... not you. Please, not you..." The words rolled off his tongue in a thick whisper, but this time there was no echo. The sound of other voices filtered down to him from the emptiness above. He turned his useless eyes upward and lay very still. The sounds came again, and he recognized one of the voices. It was McCoy. Bones was up there somewhere, calling to him, trying to find him.

"Bones! I'm here. Down here, Bones."

He listened to the echoes die away and again lay quiet. Seconds passed, then minutes, as the surrounding silence grew loud. His ears began to ache from the strain, and he relaxed his body, suddenly aware that he had been rigid... almost as rigid as... His sightless eyes turned back to where his friend would be. Spock... loyal, trusting, sensitive Spock... lying in the darkness, half-covered with dirt.

His hand reached down to touch the dear face, brushed the dirt from the clogged sockets and tenderly closed the eyelids. There were no words he could say, no comfort he could ever give again. He choked back the sob that threatened,



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grabbed another handful of dirt and lovingly placed it over his friend.

He finished the task slowly, insuring that every tiny speck of soil was in its proper place. Running his hands over the long, smooth mound, he inspected his handiwork. An odd feeling of satisfaction crept over him; he had done his best for Spock, and he could almost hear that deep, somber voice saying, 'Well done, Jim.' He smiled at the thought, thinking how like the Vulcan it would be. The picture almost held. Almost. But reality rolled in, crushing all sweet remembrances. Suddenly he slumped over the grave, hugging its damp roughness to him in an exhausted embrace. He lay there, both physically and emotionally drained, and let the bone-weariness drag him down into the artificial peace of oblivion.

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Rain spewed from the dark green Carrigan skies and splashed on the writhing form of James T. Kirk. His body quivered and twitched on the floating gurney, requiring two medical assistants to hold him down. Bones McCoy, face gray with concern, leaned over his captain and activated a scanner. Cold rain darts pelted his bare neck and head, but he ignored them, his entire attention rooted to his patient and the disturbing readings of his instrument. A frown creased his craggy features as he digested the accumulated data, and from another nearby stretcher the Vulcan's faint voice came to him.

"Doctor... the Captain...?"

"... is stable for the moment," McCoy finished without looking up. "Just lie still, Spock. We'll have you both back on board in a few seconds."

Weakly, the Vulcan obeyed, easing his aching body back into its reclining position on the stretcher, but his eyes were frozen on the tortured form of James Kirk. He sighed wearily and wondered at the events that had transpired -- the meetings, the chaos, the bidding, the banquet last night.

Thirty-two hours ago, he and Kirk had beamed down to Carrigan to 'talk turkey', as the Captain had so elegantly put it. Carrigan had just discovered the road to galactic richness, large deposits of aepli -- a rare and powerful new energy element -- discovered to be lodged in their seemingly endless mountain ranges. Since the planet lacked the capital or equipment to extract and process the aepli, the Carrigan Premier sent word via his ambassadors that the mining rights were up for grabs to the highest bidder. Starfleet had sent Kirk and the Enterprise to the table.

Vice Premier Shamar met Kirk and Spock cordially, and their first few hours on the strange and colorful planet were spent amid mass confusion as each new representative arrived and tried to get *his* bid in first.

A minor riot occurred when two Klingon agents showed up, but the Carrigans proved themselves to be more than capable of maintaining order. Calm was soon restored, and the business at hand dealt with in a civilized manner.

As expected, Starfleet's representatives and the Klingon factor were tied as the highest bidders. All other agents were thanked, a recess was called, and a banquet thrown in honor of the four remaining competitors. Kirk and Spock had enjoyed the festivities, the dancing, and several native delicacies, before retiring to their room early. Kirk, who'd been aching to explore those lavender mountains, had bid Spock good night and had fallen asleep before his head hit the pillow.

Carrigan's emerald dawn found Spock halfway up the side of Newwa Mountain. Kirk's almost childlike fascination with the idea of scaling the mountain had proved contagious, and the Vulcan found himself trudging along behind his exuberant Captain. During the climb, Kirk had kept up a constant conversation, mostly on the beauty of the purple mountains against Carrigan's lovely sky; and while the scenery was not lost on Spock, his interests were in the flora that grew in massive clumps of turquoise blue. Their fragrance was mildly nostalgic, bringing to mind the lilac clusters of Earth that his mother had tried vainly to cultivate in their garden on Vulcan.

The attacks had come on suddenly and unexpectedly. One minute Kirk was animatedly commenting on the fact that the mining rights were 'in Starfleet's bag', and the next, he was rag-doll limp among the powder-blue petals. And before Spock could react, he, too, was stricken -- painful cramping in his stomach, abdomen and thighs, severe nausea and a sudden, all-over feeling of weakness. He barely managed to contact the ship before losing consciousness.

He had awakened to the splashing of cold raindrops on his face and the annoying poking and prodding of Doctor McCoy's instruments, but his first thoughts were of Kirk.

A chill wind was picking up, blowing the glistening green droplets helter skelter. McCoy hovered protectively over Kirk, shielding the feverish face from the worst of the storm. At the same time he whipped out a sopping wet communicator.

"Scotty!" His voice rose in an effort to compete with the roar of the approaching deluge.

Static crackled from the communicator and an almost inaudible voice answered, "Aye, Doctor. Are ye ready for beam-up?"

McCoy hugged Kirk's body closer and screamed into the device. "NOW, SCOTTY! GET US THE HELL OUT OF..."

The air around him sparkled and he felt the familiar transporter tug.

"... HERE!" McCoy finished the statement in the transporter reception booth, but didn't waste precious time wondering at the miracle of the teleportation machine. He hurried from the platform, pulling Kirk's stretcher along and barking orders left and right.

"Get these men to Sickbay. Hurry."

The party of five departed the room, leaving green crystal rain puddles behind them.

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The steady beeping of the twin monitors over the beds and an occasional guttural moan from Kirk broke the steady silence of Sickbay. The lights in the room had been dimmed to simulate night, and except for the exhausted form of McCoy, all nonessential medical personnel were now absent from the room. Strict isolation procedures were in effect, even though the disease that had struck the Captain and First Officer was diagnosed as not contagious.

Consultations with Carrigan doctors had revealed the malady; they recognized the symptoms immediately. It was a rare form of food poisoning known as botuoinus -- a degenerative nightmare that attacked the basic reserves of the nervous system. Imaginary horrors flooded the victim's dreams, and the more one struggled to fight the terrors in his fevered brain, the more the disease thrived, growing stronger as the delirium increased. By using his last reserves of strength to fight the illusions in his brain, the victim left his body open to the always fatal physical symptoms -- weakness, high fever and great pain. So far, no Carrigan had ever recovered from the disease.

The lotisian stew served at the banquet was found to be the guilty food. In addition to Kirk and Spock, two Carrigan citizens were also afflicted, and one death had already occurred: Kab, the high-ranking Klingon bidder, had succumbed to his delusions, literally committing suicide by viciously fighting the terrors that filled his fevered brain. Kenra, the other Klingon representative, returned to his ship, swearing vengeance on everyone involved, especially the Carrigans. The Klingon ship had warped out of orbit several hours ago.

Of all the victims, Spock seemed the least affected, somehow managing, with his logic, to keep a tenuous hold on the delirium and allowing his Vulcan stamina to take care of the pain and fever. It was decided that with complete rest and absolutely no medication to cloud his mind, Spock would recover.

But for Kirk and the other two victims, there would be no future. No drug could completely shut off their brains for the duration of the disease without killing their bodies. It was a plain verdict of death -- one that McCoy simply refused to accept.

From his bedridden vantage point, Spock could see the doctor in his office, head studiously bowed over his research. He had been told that nothing could be done to save Kirk or the others, yet still he drove himself unmercifully, searching for the elusive cure. Spock had tried on several occasions to get up and help, but McCoy put a stop to his unwanted overtures by threatening to tie him to the bed if he didn't stay there voluntarily. And so he'd lain here, listening to the pitiful gasps that issued from Kirk's fever-wracked body. Hours dragged by... hours without sleep... hours without hope...

Spock watched as McCoy's head nodded, then reluctantly surrendered to the inevitable and rested gently on the desk top. The doctor was exhausted.

A low animal groan pulled Spock's attention away from McCoy. Kirk's head lolled on the pillow, and his face grimaced at some imaginary horror. His lips moved, forming the name... "Spock..." and the Vulcan saw a single tear trickle

down his cheek and drop to the sweat-drenched linen. Jim couldn't take much more of this abuse; his inner struggles with the frightening visions were sapping his strength, allowing the pain and fever to slowly extinguish the fragile life spark.

As the Vulcan watched, Kirk cried out weakly, futilely arching his body against another onslaught of cramps. His white-knuckled hands alternately clenched and unclenched with the agony that sliced through him, and Spock automatically reached out, stretching his hands across the aisle that separated their beds.

The effort drained him, but he refused to give up. Jim needed him, needed his strength and vigor. And the Vulcan needed the firm reassurance that his friend was still alive. Sweat appeared on his forehead and slaked down his face, the dull ache began again in his stomach, but he continued to strain... closer, ever closer... a tiny, micro-inch at a time... until finally the long, slender fingers closed around the clammy human hand.

At the first touch his head exploded. He flinched at the sudden invasion of Kirk's suffering that flowed through the mild telepathic touch. It was almost unbearable; he could feel his own symptoms intensifying, sapping his strength and will. Some inborn instinct for self-preservation almost made him pull away, but he forced himself to hold on, to tone down the pain. He fervently hoped that Jim's pain was also diminishing, and was gratified to see that for the first time in hours, Kirk was calm.

He lay with his face turned toward Spock, relaxed, mouth slightly open, and Spock felt a pang of tenderness toward him.

" 'Friend, thou more than a brother; why wert thou not born in my father's dwelling?' " From some ancient book, the words coursed through him, strengthening his resolve and spurring an idea. It grew within him with an electrifying charge so powerful that it completely dwarfed the dual agonies he was enduring.

Logical. It was only logical, and he chastised himself for not thinking of it before. If a mere touch had so relieved Kirk of the physical symptoms, then a sustained mind meld would probably be strong enough to halt the delirium altogether, leaving Kirk's mind and body free to attack the fatal physical symptoms. It was almost a mathematical equation. The only unknown was his own capacity to bear both agonies, but that would not remain unknown for long.

Spock took a deep, shuddering breath, heaved himself to a weak sitting, then a rather shaky standing, position. He stood there for a moment, gathering the reserves of his dwindling strength, and stared down at Kirk. The ever-present lock of unruly hair lay plastered to his damp forehead, and the Vulcan reached out, tenderly brushed it back, and assumed the mind meld position.

"Just what the hell do you think you're doing?"

A human would have jumped guiltily at the words, but Spock merely turned his head. McCoy stood there, his worn face a jumble of mixed emotions.

"I am endeavoring to save his life, Doctor."

"And how do you propose to do that?"

"A mind meld. To calm him, show him that the terrors he is experiencing are not real." He swayed, and McCoy reached out immediately to steady him.

"Don't lie to me, Spock. I know what you've got in mind, and it's suicide. Taking on his delirium in your weakened condition will kill you." McCoy clung desperately to the Vulcan's arm, his faded blue eyes pleading with him.

"There is a possibility that it will prove fatal for me," Spock took a deep breath and turned back toward Kirk, "but it is a fact that Jim will die if I don't try to help him." He pulled himself from McCoy's grasp and again placed his fingers on the unconscious face of his friend.

"Damn it, Spock! I love him too, and I'd give my own life ten times over to save him, but I can't. It's impossible for me." McCoy pulled savagely at the Vulcan's arm. "I won't lose both of you."

Spock stiffened, a granite monolith, immovable. His voice was too quiet, too calm. "Envy, Doctor?"

McCoy's eyes narrowed and the Vulcan saw anger flash in the human's eyes. "I'll inject you with a sedative..."

For several moments the useless threat hung in the air between them. Finally, the Vulcan responded. "Then you condemn both of us to a lingering death." The calm voice resounded loudly in the hushed stillness, and McCoy finally loosed his grip. There was nothing more he could do for either of his friends. It was obvious that Spock had made up his mind.

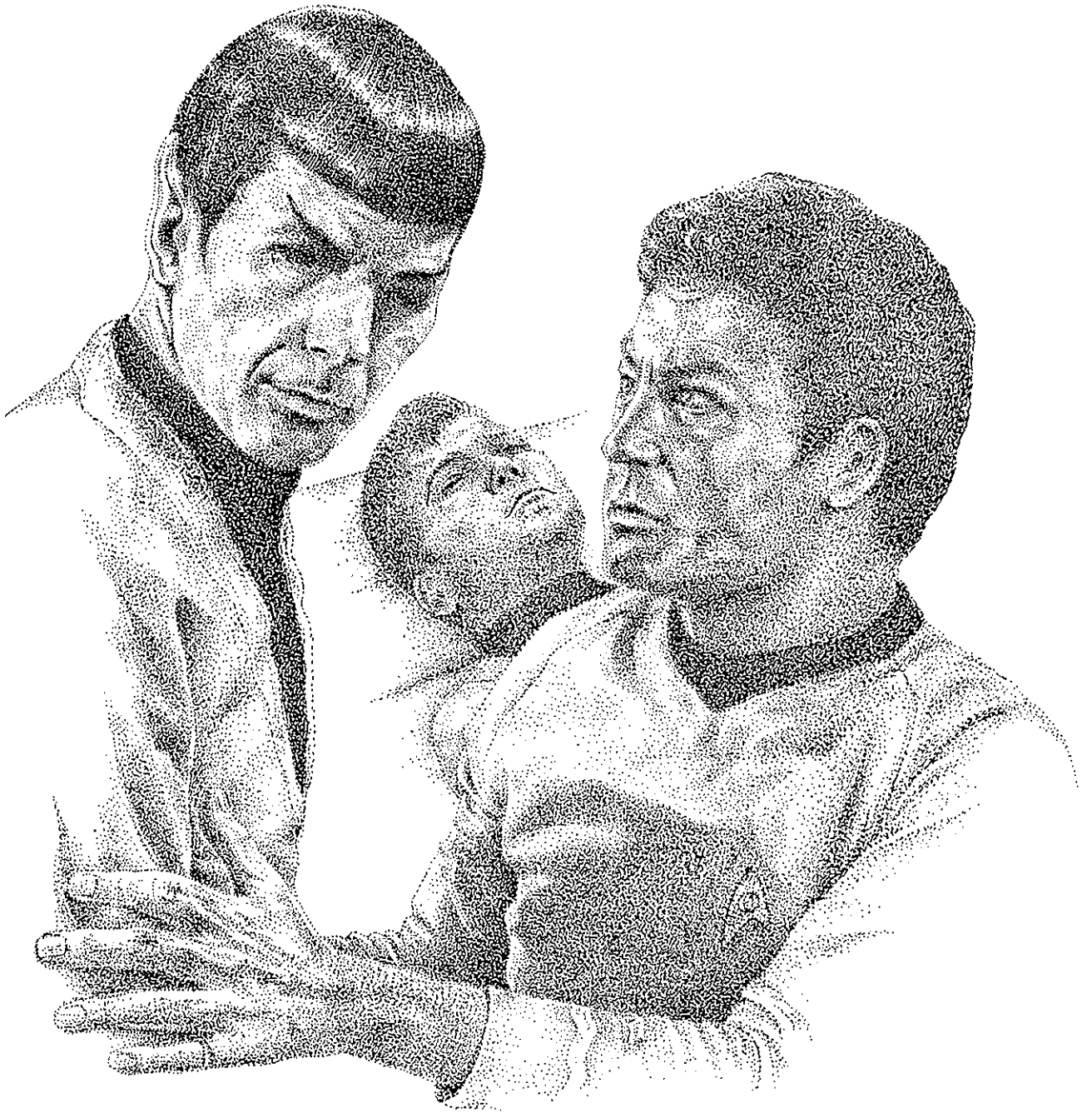
Envy. Spock had said that he was envious, and as he watched the sensitive fingers take the familiar position, he decided that the Vulcan was probably right. He *did* envy that talent. He stood apart from the two, alone, unable to share in this most personal of Vulcan traditions, and watched Spock enter the trancelike state. At least he could do that much for them -- be here when one of them awoke. In fact, it was *all* he could do for them, and it wasn't nearly enough. It never was.

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Kirk found the darkness becoming almost bearable. It was a soft, silent companion that wrapped its black security around him, and he snuggled deeper into it, letting the friendly night soothe away his grief and fears.

He was dying. He knew it and faced the fact with very little emotion, feeling only a mild sorrow that he had failed in his efforts to locate Bones.

He lay draped over the hastily-dug grave, hugging the surrounding quiet fiercely to him. He would not let it go. Here was warmth. Here was solitude. All he had to do was close his eyes and it would be over. All the pain, the terror, the whole sordid nightmare would come to an end. Simple. Quick.



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Painless. But the fair-lashed lids refused to close. It was not in his basic character to give up. He knew it... and his eyes knew it. He sighed, peeled himself from Spock's grave and again began the useless hands and knees search for a way out.

He had gone only a little over halfway around his second circumference when a vague uneasiness began to play on his nerves. It made his skin tingle, and the hair on the back of his neck stood on end. He was no longer alone in the darkness. He felt the 'other's' presence so near, so close, and the fear trickled back again.

Something made him turn his gaze upward into the black void and he was astounded to see a tiny pinprickle of light appear in the dense, swirling mists above. The pinprickle grew, expanding and contracting rhythmically, until its blinding light flooded the entire area. The brilliant whiteness pierced his eyes, forcing him to squeeze them tightly shut.

"Jim!" He heard a deep, resonant voice, and terror coursed through him. Vainly struggling to see, he forced his eyes open, felt the sharp stab as the sudden brightness invaded. He gasped with the pain, sank weakly to his knees.

"Jim. Don't be afraid. Trust me, follow my voice. I'm here to help you."

The words fell on deaf ears. Kirk wiped his streaming eyes and, blinking furiously, finally managed to focus them. He looked up again and gasped. The sight was magnificent -- a gaping hole had appeared in the black heavens and, as he watched, a giant hand protruded through the rip, a ghostly, ethereal hand... a large, long-fingered hand... a very familiar hand... But that was impossible. Spock was... dead. He turned back to where he'd buried the body, and the sadness and grief impaled him again.

Shock waves flowed from above, then were joined by surprise, sympathy and a warm understanding so intense that Kirk was caught off-balance by it.

"Trust me, Jim," the 'other' said, and Kirk felt a gentle anguish wash over him. His first instinct to bolt from the scene disappeared; he swayed toward the voice, feeling somehow calmed and reassured by this vague, insubstantial being.

"Don't look back -- just follow me." The voice caressed his terrors, smoothed away the fear and he tried to obey, but a warm wind began to blow enticingly over his shoulder. The air around him was suddenly ripe with bittersweet memories. He turned around and froze in mid-stride.

The darkness/brightness was gone, and he found himself standing in the middle of a vast, seemingly endless cornfield. The stalks of ripening ears stretched as far as the naked eye could see. To his right stood a large, two-story farm house. His grandfather's farm. He panned the area, taking in the blue-gray sky, the fluffy, buttermilk clouds. The breeze was spring-time warm, fresh and sweet smelling. He was home... on Earth... but how?

The stalks were much too tall, and he had to stand on tiptoe to peek over their gently curling leaves. He put out a hand to touch an ear, half-expecting it to disappear into thin air. But it was real, the exterior rough and grainy, the interior moistly sticky and lined with sunshine yellow silk.

A rustling noise to his left caught his attention, and he turned, saw a boy loping through the endless rows. Kirk recognized the tousled hair and freckled face immediately.

"Sam?"

The word was laced with sorrow and sprang involuntarily from his lips. He shoved old unwanted truths and memories aside; this was Sam, his brother, racing toward him. And he was Jimmy Kirk, eight years old and hiding out in the corn again.

"Jimmy! Where in the heck are you?"

"Here." It was a whisper, almost a prayer for this lovely scene to stay forever. Then suddenly he was moving, running, whipping through the overgrown stalks, yelling at the top of his lungs. "I'm here, Sam! Right here!"

He plowed through the field, running for what seemed a very long distance before finally stopping to catch his breath. He sank down, squatting in the rich brown soil, wheezing and gasping in the suddenly too warm air. Blinking away the many spots in front of his eyes, he rested for a moment, then looked up.

Horror greeted him in the guise of an orange and gray splotched desert. The air around him swelled, rippled, and he sucked in another breath, scalding his lungs. He swivelled around -- Sam, the farm, the corn field -- all had vanished, leaving only this bleak, alien land.

He glanced at the sky; it was ablaze, a fiery crimson red streaked with skinny pink-tinged clouds. Nothing stirred in this barren waste, not even the searing air.

"Home." The faint feeling crept over him, squeezing him in a firm embrace. "Home!" He heard the word again, echoing through his soul. A sudden surge of homesickness drifted from the 'other' and he tasted the lightly seasoned air, pulled in another deep lungful, found that it was now a bearable temperature. He reveled in its deliciousness. The heat was no longer uncomfortable; it was invigorating. "Home, home..." danced through his head.

He stared down at his feet and saw a tiny maguado bud drooping plaintively toward the cinnamon colored soil. Its leaves were scorched, turning quickly to a leathery brown in the savage environment. The stem was withered and bent, crinkling under the blood red sky. *A flower... dying in the desert.* It meant something, but he couldn't quite remember.

A gentle-fingered memory skimmed lightly over his brain, completing the sentence. *"Loneliness is a thirst... a flower dying in the desert."* The words came to him from the 'other', and he felt the meaning, the eternal emptiness. He was suddenly filled with an aching loneliness and pity; he reached down to pluck the dying flower, end its awful suffering.

But a miracle occurred. At his first touch, the tiny bud began to blossom, straightening its fragile stem, its leaves and pale blue petals becoming satin smooth and supple.

Then the scene around him dissolved into a million tiny pieces. They broke apart, scattering on the reddish sand, and he was back in the darkness again, staring up at the giant glistening hand. The only souvenir from his painted desert was the maguado bud, still flowering in his hand. It dawned on him that he wasn't afraid anymore. Only tired... so damned tired of this game.

A glint of some large metallic object beneath the eerie hand caught his eye and he was drawn toward it, came to a halt at the bottom rung of an enormous ladder. He took a tentative step up toward the hand and felt a surge of relief flow to him from the 'other'. It was a powerful feeling, and he continued, moving steadily upward.

He continued for what seemed like days, but time had long since lost its power over him.

"Continue, Captain. Don't look back, just keep climbing."

The disembodied voice kept spouting words of encouragement, but he was tiring. He sagged against the cold metal rung to rest and stared back down.

Far below was the farm, and in the middle of the swaying, inviting corn stood his brother. Sam waved to him, beckoning for him to return, and without hesitation he started back down.

"No, Jim..." The voice from above was abruptly cut off, as though the owner had lost the power to speak. A moment of silence passed before it began again. This time the voice was weaker, more distant, almost on the verge of fading out. "Don't go back down there, Jim. Please... I don't... have enough strength left... to fight it again."

The voice trailed off and Kirk hung suspended. Far below, Sam continued to beckon. And above, the hand shimmered and glowed, coaxing him upward. It was a tug of war and Kirk began to feel like the rope. He was strangling in the middle.

He descended another rung, then glanced at the maguado bud in his hand. It was shriveling, becoming brown and brittle.

The voice of the 'other' came to him once more, so tired, so weary. "You hold my life in your hand, Jim. Without you, I'm empty... cold and dead inside. You are the source of my soul's nourishment, my fertile soil, my spring showers and summer storms. Without you, I do not wish..." Again the great weakness was apparent and the voice grew silent.

Kirk hovered... Purgatory... Heaven in the form of his brother was far below. To possess it, all he had to do was descend the ladder. Yet, above was loneliness... an aching hollowness that he and he alone could fill. He sensed the desperate need of the 'other'; it surged within him in a final, urgent plea.

He stared down at Sam -- his only brother, Sam -- teasing, laughing, loving, irritating Sam. God, how he missed him!

But Sam was dead. The shimmering green field below was from a long ago time. He didn't belong there anymore, didn't want to go back and relive those times.

He took a step upward and almost immediately the small maguado plant began to rejuvenate and grow, thriving again. He continued his upward trek and never looked back.

Hour after hour, hand over hand, he strove for the ultimate goal. Three more rungs, only three more... but he was exhausted, couldn't make himself take another step. He stopped, stretched his right hand up to touch the larger, shining one. The ghostly hand had grown smaller during his climb; it was pale, transparent, seeming almost on the verge of fading away altogether. Yet it seemed to gain strength from his nearness and returned the reach. Both hands, human flesh and glowing image, strained to reach, both refusing to give up this close to success. Finally they were rewarded. The hands clasped, entwined, bonding. And at the touch, the maguado flower slipped from Kirk's grasp, falling back into the black abyss below. He didn't see it burst into a thousand turquoise blooms. He only saw the long, pale fingers curl around his own, and felt the overwhelming joy of the 'other'.

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His heavy lids opened reluctantly, took in the sight of blurred faces hovering over him. He blinked twice, finally bringing his surroundings into sharp, vivid focus. Muffled thrums beat a rhythmic pattern above his head, and he tilted back on the pillow, took in the noisy vitals monitor. His clouded brain absorbed the audio-visual data, sifted, rearranged the clues and finally came to a conclusion -- Sickbay. And the faces above were...

"Spock... Bones..."

His left hand received a slight pressure from the Vulcan's side. Bewildered, he stared up at the two faces, a torrent of questions threatening to burst forth. He saw Spock sway unsteadily, and McCoy's worried face disappeared from the right side of his line of vision, reappearing almost immediately on the opposite.

"You've done it, Spock! He's passed the crisis. Now will you please get some rest..." The voice and words were harsh, but Kirk heard the undisguised relief in them, too.

The Vulcan didn't answer, and Kirk felt another squeeze from the too-warm hand, saw the thin, colorless lips pull into a faint shadow of a smile. Their eyes met... minds merged... fathomless burgandy and sparkling sherry.. and he felt a surge of triumph and elation. At last he knew the face of the 'other', his savior, his benefactor, and he, too, smiled at their shared secret.

A tiny silver strand, perhaps fueled by the physical touching of their hands, remained of the meld.

The flower blooms again... fluttered across his brain.

...and our thirst is quenched... he returned, just before the Vulcan's face was wrenched from view... McCoy was asserting his authority over all in Sickbay.

The afterglow continued, a delightful burning sensation, almost like a mild intoxication, and he felt full, complete, whole again. He gloried in the experience.

"Jim, can you hear me?"

McCoy's voice pierced through the layers of pleasant fog. The doctor worked over him, checking the monitor, waving his scanner, but Kirk was much too tired to respond verbally.

"Hmmm... um-hmmm..." The comforting sounds of Bones' fussing were reassuring to his ears.

"You've been very ill, Jim, but I'll explain everything to you later when you're stronger. Right now I'm going to give you a little something to make you sleep."

Kirk grinned inwardly. He was already lounging in a blissful twilight state; he had no need of McCoy's wonder potions. The subtle pressure on his arm, the gentle surge of lulling warmth that spread eagerly through his limbs and body swept him far away from the reality of Sickbay. A friendly darkness swelled, broke, enveloped him, and he surrendered.

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The patient was beginning to lose his patience. He had lain in his bed all morning and not one soul had been in to see to his needs. Not that he *had* any immediate needs. It was just... he was beginning to feel neglected. A glance at his roommate showed a slumbering Spock, totally occupied in destroying the myth that Vulcans don't snore.

His head still throbbed; he itched; his skin tingled with something akin to the after-effects of a great electrical shock. He scratched the back of his palms absently and heaved a gigantic, bored sigh.

He already knew the whole story. Those events had occurred nearly three days ago. Since then, the Vulcan's own crisis had passed and Spock had been sleeping peacefully for 12.8 hours.

The sound of a sleepy throat clearing itself brought Kirk out of his momentary grouchiness, and he turned to his friend. Spock was awake, sitting up and staring at him with glassy eyes.

The faint echoes of the meld activated again and Kirk smiled. "Welcome back, Spock."

The Vulcan stretched elegantly, working the kinks from his stiff, sore body. He opened his mouth to reply, but his twisting gyrations brought the table at the side of his bed into focus -- and its single decoration. He stared at the tiny maguado plant and turned to Kirk.

"I remember," came from the occupant of the opposite bed.

"It was not necessary to..." the Vulcan's words were quickly cut off.

"Risk your life to save mine? How many times in all these years? How many? It seems you're always there when I need you, Spock."

Spock lifted the blue-tinged flower, made to examine every leaf and petal. "The opposite is also true, Jim." He set the plant back down and stared at Kirk.

"We won't ever let it die, will we?" A trace of the familiar, lop-sided grin tugged at the human's face, and the Vulcan knew the question was not about the tiny seedling on the table.

"No, Jim. We shall not let it die."

A moment of silence passed as each man pondered the meaning of their words. Then Kirk spoke, abruptly changing the subject.

"I've been informed that the Carrigans have given the mining rights to us. Seems the Klingons took their marbles and went home."

Spock looked up, obviously confused. "Marbles?"

There was a devilish twinkle in those hazel eyes. "Of course, Mr. Spock. An old Earth expression. It means they've decided to let us win; they threw in the towel."

"Threw in the towel?" Spock knew the game and was playing his part well.

"Yes, well, 'throwing in the towel' means that the Klingons are sore losers. We've got the rights to mine the aepli."

"Because the Klingons took away the marbles and threw us a towel."

"Right."

Spock waited the appropriate amount of time, then leaned back into the softness of his pillow. "If you say so, Captain."

Kirk also lay back, feeling suddenly very tired, but very warm inside. His mission was successfully accomplished, his ship was running smoothly under the capable hands of Scotty, and Spock, that inscrutable, unshakable, wonderful Vulcan, was unchanged.

"Yes, I say so, Mr. Spock."





Earth and Moon

I lay broken and bleeding
In a world of death,
Starless and cold it was,
Windless and dark.
My enemies had taken all away,
And only a breath lay between
My mind and endless emptiness.
Then ~ a glimmer;
A faint, hope-rushed blush of light,
And then
My soul upraised
to touch the moon
Which was your face.

Not sun, I fear, are thee,
But Earth-born, human and
Mortal, after all.
Earth beauty, the all too fleeting
Golds and greens,
Yet you hold one satellite
Forever in your orb.
It has been said
The moon is cold and lifeless
But somewhere, a hidden heart
Bleeds for your pain,
And, timeless as untiring stars,
Your moon, to reach and heal
Encircles on...
If I have any light,
It shines for thee.

Martha J. Bonds

Breathing Space

By Carol Frisbie & Susan K. James

The shuttlecraft landed smoothly, without a jolt.

"For once," Kirk thought with a sigh of relief, "we made it without a crash -- no explosions, no leaking of *propylene nitrate*. Now, if we'll only manage to get *on the beach* without any major landslides..."

It was only a short shore leave to complete his '*healing time*,' as McCoy was fond of referring to the extended period of 'take it easy Jim' he imposed on Kirk. Pure torture. And, he could have sworn McCoy had secretly enjoyed it, too. Why the hell did he think he had a right to order Kirk around, anyway? But, of course, he did -- and besides, *between friends* a bit of protective 'mothering' was, after all, acceptable. Good old sawbones, no doubt he did possess *the human touch*... He only wished the doctor would get over his feeling of being left out, of running a *third wheel* to their dynamic duo.

His other half... his gaze shifted to his First Officer, visibly slumped under *the weight* of having to break his commendable work habits -- and of all things, for a pointless shore leave. But McCoy suggested (wording it, rather emphatically, with "that's an order, Jim!") lots of exercise, swimming and *running around on green grass*, to build up his muscle tone and return his "new" legs to their old efficiency. Of course, running, swimming, getting painfully crisp-green tans -- those were not some of Spock's favorite things. No, he was definitely *not of that feather*. As a matter of fact, Spock already seemed positively *enslaved* as he slowly trotted down the sandy slope, the anticipation of the totally useless time ahead of him clearly written all over his face.

But Kirk knew he could count on Spock, anyway, jogging by his side, braving the water unacceptably cold for his Vulcan taste, keeping him company... he could always count on Spock, just as he could during *the trial* of his latest injury. That had been quite a *rack*; it could have had a *nightmare ending*, but now he was whole again, like the phoenix reborn *of his own ashes*. Those Antosians had worked a miracle, and it was no small miracle, either. At the time he thought not even *all the king's horses and all the king's men* could put him back together again. "Oh, God," he thought, "I'm so tired of being hurt."

It was good to be back, *to piece the broken chain* of his life, his command. An old rhyme came to mind: '*... home is the hunter...*' Indeed, he was home. No more *poses* of empty bravery were needed, among his friends he found *shelter*, *freedom to stand in the light*, to be himself. His date

with fate would come, he knew, maybe in ways more colorfully horrible than his imagination could pain, but the *death mask* of fear had been removed, if only temporarily, if only for now. *When the time comes...* but it was *not yet time...*

He lay in the sand, a breeze of *desert heat* coming from the south, warming his body, invading his pores, and as he closed his eyes in the changing *visions of sun and shadow*, a face of dark beauty crossed before him. Uhura, with the ebony eyes... a *nightsong*, sung and spent many a night. The *breach* between them had healed with his healing, strengthening muscles. But somehow something was wrong -- different. The vivacious, expressive face, the voluptuous soft body pleased him less than before. *Changes...* he felt an ambivalence, a subconscious yearning within him, a hunger new to his nature, unnameable, unidentified. And as of late, his aesthetic appreciation grew for slim, squarely-built frames, austere lines. The universe was a series of endless *variations on a theme*, an infinite number of alternatives... What was his *alternative*?

He raised his eyes and between the warm sand, misty ocean and blazing sun, captured in the *realms of gold*, he saw his friend lying lazily stretched in relaxed joy.

"Is this my prim, tight-assed, pedantic Vulcan?" he wondered. "He sprawls there in such delight he makes me believe in *sensuous Vulcans*, for all the logical contradiction in the term. But then, again, if he fell out, even temporarily, from his world of logic, discipline and control, then I'd say it's a *world well lost*."

Spock felt the searching gaze *thrust* into him with a probing yet insistant intimacy, and he opened his eyes in response. He was actually thankful for the intrusion, it put an end to his disturbing daydream. The same one, again. *Snakepit*. The painfully repetitious, fixed dream; the snake, the white-sanded desert, the two floating figures drifting in and out of focus, never fully recognizable yet never total strangers either. And the snake striking out, as always, jealous, claiming, killing. *The beast* within him.

"Spock, Spock?" He barely heard the smiling voice addressing him. "Mr. Spock! Care to take some *nourishment* in the form of a computer-concocted, prepackaged, pre-measured and I'm assured perfectly balanced meal?"

Spock was by his side, lending him a hand as he stood up. Kirk looked at him, teasing fondness brightening the hazel of his eyes. "It's beautiful down here, isn't it? I feel... I feel like I'm in *contact* with the universe, myself...." 'and with you,' he added without words. "There's a scent of excitement in the air, a taste of things to come -- it's almost like an M.O."

"I beg your pardon, Jim... Like a what?"

"An M.O., Spock -- look it up." And with a playful grin he dashed off toward their beach cottage. A few moments later he returned, indignantly munching on a peanut butter sandwich.

"Shit, Spock!" he burst out, annoyed. "That mess computer is fucked up again. No avocados!"

Spock found it rather difficult to demonstrate the appropriate expression of mournful sympathy expected of him. The Captain's culinary preferences were still and always a mystery to him.

"Jim, I have not told you yet, but I shall have to request special leave on Vulcan." Spock spoke without any introduction and Kirk stiffened in surprise.

"You don't... you're not... it's not again... dammit, Spock, are you in that condition?"

"If you are referring to the pon farr, Jim, no. Due to your timely 'assistance', I managed to beat off the affliction. The purpose of my leave would be a *pilgrimage* to my fathers' place of worship. I shall not require long... I shall regret leaving you."

" 'Parting is all we know of heaven and all we need of hell'," Kirk quoted, easing the moment with the light tone. "Besides, Spock, you're not your *brother's keeper*. You are my brother, though, even Garth said so. I'll miss you."

He was silent for a few moments, surveying the horizon. He would miss Spock -- the thought of parting already made him miss the Vulcan. But it would be good for both of them, would give them a much needed *lesson in perspective*.

Time *passages* -- they hadn't been separated since they had met, more than three years ago. No, he corrected himself with a chuckle, three years, four months and 2.4 days ago... give or take...

"By the way, Spock, permission granted for your leave. Have a good time, and say hello to T'Uriamne for me. We'll be headed toward Tholian space -- hell, just the mention of it gives me a 'floating' feeling, right smack here, in *the pit* of my stomach... "

"The Thol... uh... Tholian sector?" Spock stammered, visibly shaken.

"Yes, I've just received orders from Admiral Lewis, the bastard. Guess where he is now? Just transferred to Starbase 9. I'll bet we hear more from him. With friends like Lewis, who needs Tholians... Anyway, we are to proceed to the Tholian sector again, this time to retrieve the Defiant. Nice job -- Used Starship Hauling and Delivery Service, Inc. I only hope I won't run into any Tholians this time -- the last rendezvous with them was quite a *pas de trois*. They must want me, and want me bad, for *the battle lost*. An eye for an eye, you know."

It was a strange statement, even coming from an irrational human. It prompted Spock to take a long, searching look into the incredibly large pools of hazel. He was concerned.

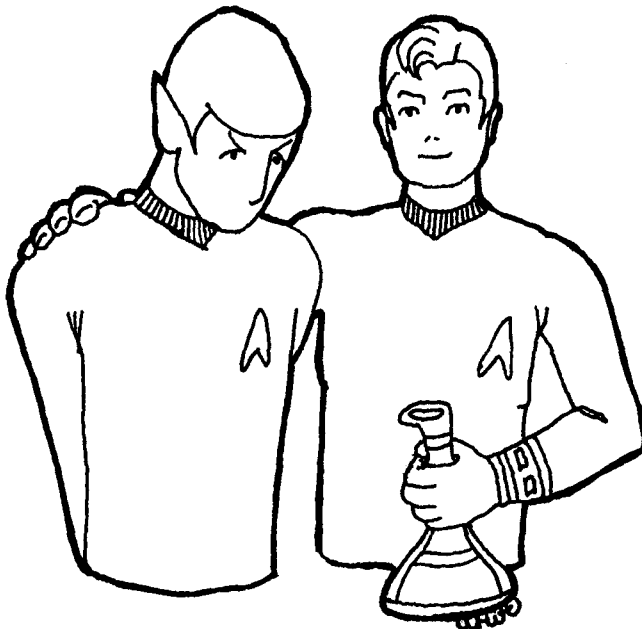
"Jim, if I perceive correctly the Tholian's attitude, the danger cannot be overstated. Do exercise caution with them."

"Don't worry, Spock, I'm not blind to my own impetuosity. Besides, I lost my legs in the last assassination attempt -- what else can I lose?" As an afterthought, he added, "I don't think I'll see much action on this mission."

They were already on their way back toward the cottage, making their journey in the silent *night*. The world around was tranquil and there was peace between them, yet Kirk felt a strange foreboding... as though, somehow, with their parting on this alien planet, he would never see Spock again...

A grim *nightvision*, indeed.....

AUTHORS' NOTE: You nagged. You cajoled. You sometimes even threatened. You sent hundreds of SASEs. In response, and with our usual efficiency, speed and inimitable style, here is our Chapters 1, 2 and 3 of NIGHTVISIONS. LoC's -- good ones, that is -- will be cheerfully accepted!



And You Were There

BY Sarah Leibold

New York, Depression 1930's.

Edith, a death-dealing truck.

Must not interfere, MUST NOT INTERFERE.

Oh God, my love, my forever lost love.

And you were there.

Deneva, planetwide insanity, mass death.

Sam gone before even seen.

Watching Aurelan die by inches.

Only Peter living in such agony, so young, vulnerable.

And you were there.

Yonada, wandering starship planet.

Bones, incurable, weakening before my eyes.

Such pitiable short time left.

Decision to stay, leave us/me even sooner than needed.

And you were there.

Planet so Earth-like, pastoral, tranquil.

Miramanees all loving, giving, soft femininity.

No remembrance of ship, crew, agonies of command.

But reality returned. Destroyed she and the child I never saw.

And you were there.

Enterprise, battlefield of both halves of me.

James Kirk split apart, blindly groping for reunion.

You understood, though brutal in that understanding.

In the end rejoining was painfully accomplished.

And you were there.

Ever and always by my side.

Through uncounted crises,

Heart-wrenching decisions I can never forget

(and one you did your best to erase.)

I pray my Vulcan friend that now til universe end

You will be there.

Watch In The Night

By Sibyl Hancock

*A thousand years in thy sight are but
as yesterday when it is past, and as
a watch in the night.*

...PSALMS 90.4

Pain. A throbbing ache that slammed from his forehead to the nape of his neck and back again. He tried to swallow and found his throat dry, his mouth like cotton. Perhaps if he could see... He opened his eyes a fraction and winced as light stabbed at his pupils, moaning in spite of himself.

"He's coming around," a familiar voice said. "Hand me my scanner, Ensign."

Spock forced his eyes open and saw Dr. McCoy bending over him. There was a cut on the doctor's cheek that oozed blood and a bruise that was beginning to blacken along his jaw.

McCoy sighed with relief. "You'll be all right, Spock. This will make you feel better."

The Vulcan heard the hiss of a hypo and braced for the inevitable wave of nausea as the stimulant raced into his bloodstream. His vision began to clear, and memory returned in a disjointed scramble. They were in a disabled shuttlecraft -- where?

"Captain? Where is Captain Kirk?" Spock rasped.

McCoy shook his head. "We haven't been able to find him. Ronson and he were both thrown out of the shuttlecraft when we crashed, but Jim's gone."

Spock sat up, swaying slightly. The shuttlecraft was canted to the starboard, and the smell of burned wiring hung heavy in the air. Lieutenant King was adjusting the setting on the emergency beacon with one arm, his other arm in a sling. Ensign Ronson was sitting with one of his legs splinted and stretched uncomfortably across an adjacent seat.

"I can't seem to recall crashing," Spock said, "or even why we crashed."

McCoy nodded. "Perfectly understandable. You've had a pretty bad blow to your head -- any harder, and it would have been a concussion. Let's see if I can jog your memory. We were heading back from surveying a planet with peculiar seismic disturbances when something happened to the shuttle controls. We were pulled off course, and you tried to find a planet suitable for emergency landing. Next thing anyone knew, we crashed, and here we are."

"Where is *here*?" Spock murmured. He stood up, albeit shakily, and crossed to pull up one of the shuttle window covers. All he could see was a murky darkness that crawled and churned as he watched.

"It's black as pitch out there," McCoy said, "and hotter 'n hell. You can't see any stars. You can't see your hand in front of you. Even our phaserlights don't do much good."

"Infrared," Spock said softly and started toward the supply cabinet. His brows drew together in consternation when he found the cabinet splintered and equipment broken inside it. It was remarkable that any of the crew had survived the crash. He carefully withdrew a pair of goggles, dusting tiny shards of glass off them. At least there was one pair intact.

"What are you doing, Spock?" McCoy asked, running his scanner over him again.

"I am retrieving a pair of filter goggles, Doctor. We seem to have crashed on a world with a sun that yields infrared light. Without these goggles, searching outside would be practically useless."

"You're not in any shape to search," McCoy protested. "I'm not even sure of your condition. My blasted scanner isn't operating correctly."

Spock raised an eyebrow. "I am a bit shaken, but I must begin looking for the Captain at once. How long have we been here and have you been able to take any readings?"

"We've been here four hours, sir," Lt. King replied, looking up from the wires he was splicing, "although we were all unconscious part of that time. The readings -- well, I'm not certain they're reliable; there's a great deal of interference around here. Our instruments don't even register the presence of infrared light. The air is breathable, although it contains some sulfur and other odorous gases, and it's over 100 degrees Fahrenheit out there. Besides that, I think there may be some kind of life on the planet."

Spock cocked his head. "You *think*?"

King nodded. "The sensors don't register life as we know it, but when I went out there hunting for the Captain and Ronson, I found Ronson. Captain Kirk wasn't anywhere around the shuttle. I -- I heard or felt a movement -- a stirring."

"Can you be more specific?" Spock questioned, concern for Kirk edging his voice.

"No, sir. I came back in with Ronson."

"You've checked the controls?"

"Yes, sir. They're all out."

"Radio?"

"It's out, too."

"And the emergency beacon?"

"I think I can get it going."

"Very well." Spock turned to Ronson. "Do you have anything to add?"

"No, sir," the Ensign replied. "I felt like I was smothering out there, that's all." He suddenly grimaced with pain.

"I'm going to have to sedate him," McCoy said, already preparing his hypo.

Spock pulled the goggles over his eyes, settling the lenses carefully in place. "I shall begin looking for the Captain. Lt. King, see if you can wire the beacon on two frequencies, so that the signal will be audible outside the shuttle."

"Aye, sir, but it may take some time."

"Then proceed as quickly as possible."

"Spock, you can't go out there alone," McCoy protested.

"Doctor, there is only one pair of filter lenses intact. The other pair has one lens gone, and I must leave it here, should King or Ronson need it."

"Then I'll use my phaserlight," McCoy said. "I'm going, Spock. Jim may need me."

Spock stared at him a moment, then relented. "Very well, but we will have to employ a safety line. We cannot risk becoming separated."

Spock chafed inwardly as he adjusted the lines. McCoy would slow him down immeasurably, but if the Captain were hurt, the doctor's presence might make the difference between life and death. Armed with phasers, Spock and McCoy stepped into the murky blackness, leaving the two crewmen with phasers. Ronson was already nodding, and King was under orders to remain alert.

Spock stood just beyond the shuttlecraft, allowing his eyes to adjust to the lenses. He looked upon a strange world bathed in a ruddy half-light. There were jagged outcroppings of rock, a number of grotesque growths that vaguely resembled bushes, and a sheen of moisture coated everything. Mold, thick and slippery, formed a ground cover, making footing hazardous.

"What a godawful stink," McCoy gasped, coughing.

Spock's nostrils twitched as a rank odor wafted past. "I am forced to agree with you," he admitted, "however, there are planets with much worse odors, such as Pollux IV and Beta Centaurus II."

"Yes, yes," McCoy said impatiently. "What do you see?" Without the goggles, he was severely handicapped, able to see only what the phaserlight's meager beam illuminated. He could make out the blue mold underfoot, and the beam played over a weird growth that resembled a rotting cactus. The heat was stifling, sending rivulets of sweat rolling down his back, making the tunic cling uncomfortably to his skin. He concentrated on holding the safety line and listened as Spock gave him a detailed description of the landscape.

"An ochre sky?" McCoy asked incredulously. "Ochre? It's black as coal!"

"Negative. It appears to be midday here."

McCoy blinked at the darkness overhead and collided abruptly with Spock.

"I would appreciate it if you would pay attention to your footing, Doctor."

"Well, why'd you stop?" McCoy demanded.

Spock bent to study the blue mold. "If you will note, this has been disturbed recently."

McCoy squinted, seeing a smeared streak in the mold. "Then we're on the right path! Jim's been this way!"

Spock shook his head. "I would say we may have found the Captain's track, although I am not certain some other life form could not have also left this mark. There is no discernable footprint; just evidence that something has passed this way."

McCoy's skin crawled at the thought of something watching them when he was practically blind. He couldn't remember when he'd felt so vulnerable. At that moment a tiny monstrosity with ten-jointed appendages skittered over his foot, scrabbling to get away from the intruders. McCoy shrieked and jumped backward, skidding, going down with one leg twisted painfully beneath him. Spock was pulled off balance by the safety line and barely managed to avoid falling.

"Did you see that -- thing?" McCoy gasped.

"Indeed, but surely it did not warrant such extreme response." Spock grasped McCoy's arms and lifted him to his feet.

"Dammit, Spock, it startled me. If you had any nerves at all, you'd---" His breath whooshed out as he tried to walk.

"You've injured yourself," Spock said, his tone accusing.

"Well, I didn't do it on purpose!" McCoy retorted.

"I'll have to help you back to the shuttlecraft. Come." He pulled one of McCoy's arms over his shoulder.

"But what about Jim and...?"

"I will have to go alone, as I should have done in the first place," Spock replied, his lips drawn tight with frustration. "Precious time has been lost, and the sun is beginning to sink. Even I may not be able to see properly in the darkness of this world."

"Maybe there'll be a moon," McCoy suggested.

"That might only make matters worse."

McCoy decided not to question Spock further. It was enough just to try to walk with a bad leg and not slip on the slimy ground. It seemed to take twice as long to return to the shuttlecraft. Once there, Spock wasted little time. He appropriated a medi-kit and emergency rations and set out with strict orders for no one to follow, no matter what, until the Enterprise found them. In all likelihood, rescue would be many hours in coming, for they had crashed on an obscure world far from their charted course. There was also the bleak possibility that they would never be found.

Spock stepped up his pace resolutely as the ruddy sun sank in the ochre sky. Even with the lenses, Spock had difficulty seeing at times. The air appeared to churn and curl, distorting even the filtered view, so that he caught himself clenching his hands anxiously.

"Captain!" he called, listening carefully, but there was no response.

Spock knew he was on the right trail, because he had found the clear imprint of a heelmark. He had also found traces of blood mingled with the blue mold. Kirk was injured, perhaps a head wound, else why would he have wandered so far? In the infrared light, Kirk would be unable to see and might well be lost.

"Jim!" Spock shouted.

From the corner of his eye, he thought he saw a movement, but when he looked more closely, all he could see were more jagged rocks and twisted growth.

"Jim?"

No answer... nothing. Nevertheless, Spock began to experience the sensation of being watched. He fervently hoped that it was only a trick the unusual atmosphere was playing on his senses.

The sun continued to sink westward and would soon disappear beyond the peaks in the distance. Spock began to despair of finding Kirk alive. Had the communicators been functioning, the situation might be quite different, but the electromagnetic interference had successfully silenced transmission.

He removed the lenses to see darkness, oppressive and stifling, blanketing the land. Although his Vulcan eyes might discern more at night than human eyes, infrared was beyond even his visual capabilities. He slipped the goggles back over his eyes and touched a finger to another splash of blood on the ground.

"Jim!"

A sound, perhaps a moan, hovered just at the fringes of his hearing. There! He heard it again. In his urgency to locate the direction, Spock overstepped, sliding on rough rocks. He flung out his arms trying to break his fall, but his hands slid off the slime-coated surfaces. He fell sideways, crashing against the craggy ground.

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Something was brushing his face with a feather-light touch, and there was a faint tugging at his mind. Spock was dazed and sore but otherwise undamaged. Not so for the filter lenses. They were broken, with only a small strip of glass remaining in the goggles. Miraculously, the splinters of glass had burst outward and had not cut his eyes.

Spock could see nothing. He reached for his phaser... gone! Where? Fumbling in the darkness he touched only slippery mold. Pulling up the tiny strip of glass, he peered through it and still saw nothing. The sun had set, and the darkness seemed more intense than ever. With the infrared sun gone, he should be able to see better with the aid of his night vision, but he could not. A purple radiance was dancing about the soil, and Spock watched the ghostly glow playing over the superheated land while streamers of vapor rose from the blue mold. The mist was beginning to shift sideways with the breeze. For the first time, Spock noticed that the wind had begun to whistle through the rocks. No, it was more than a whistle; it was a vibrating, resonant sound that was steadily climbing to a pitch his Vulcan hearing could not tolerate without irritation. The sound ebbed and flowed with the currents of the wind and rattled his thoughts.

Again he felt a peculiar presence, quiet and deadly serious. Something as fine as gossamer brushed his face, but he could see nothing.

"Captain?" he called hopefully.

There was no response.

Come. The word was whispered in his mind. Shaking his head, he staggered to his feet and followed the tenuous touch as if it were a safety line. What was it? He didn't know, couldn't think.

Quickly! He sensed urgency and stumbled, plunging into the purple-tinged night. He had to find Jim, and somehow the soft flutter of gauze was helping.

There was a dim light ahead, blinking regularly. Spock sucked in great lungfuls of air, choking on the cloying humidity. Suddenly he found himself

crawling on his hands and knees into a cave, toward the light. Someone was there... lying on the floor.

"Jim!" Spock gasped. The cobwebs fled his mind with the shock of his discovery. He flipped the switch on Kirk's emergency light so that it became a steady beam.

Spock touched Kirk's forehead and found it abnormally hot. *Fever.* He began checking his Captain for the wound he knew existed and found it soon enough. A deep gash extended from Kirk's left ankle all the way up to his knee, and it was infected. Spock had never seen such rapid infection. There were bits of blue mold clinging to the reddened wound. Spock's hands trembled as he began to cleanse the ugly gash. Kirk still hadn't roused. He wondered what properties the rancid blue fungus contained. He fumbled with the medi-kit, selected an antibiotic, and pressed the hypo against Kirk's arm. It would not be wise to cover the wound with a spray bandage considering the mold contamination. Better to leave it open to the air.

"Spock?" Kirk reached out to touch his First Officer. "Oh, God, is it really you?"

Spock clasped Kirk's hand tightly, covering it with his warm, dry fingers. "I'm here. I've found you."

Kirk's lips trembled. "I...I thought I'd died and gone to hell. The heat...the darkness...the smell." He choked, retching weakly. "Maybe I am dead or only dreaming again that you're here."

Spock tried to swallow the constriction in his throat and placed his hands on either side of Kirk's face. "I am quite real. You must believe me, Jim. I've been searching for you for hours."

Kirk nodded, blinking quickly. "I believe you...I do. Spock, I'm so hot, so thirsty."

Spock administered a compound to reduce fever and let Kirk sip water slowly. When he judged Kirk had drunk enough, Spock began to sponge his Captain's face, gently washing away the sweat and grime. He spoke softly, relating what had taken place in the Captain's absence.

"Infrared light," Kirk murmured. "Yes, that figures. I remember the shuttlecraft crashing, and then all I knew after that was heat and darkness. I kept using my phaserlight, trying to find the way back, but there was only the dark..." His voice trailed away with remembered horror.

"How did you find this cave?" Spock asked.

"I...I'm not sure," Kirk said uncertainly. "I heard someone calling, and I thought it was you. I must have been delirious."

"No, I think you did hear something, for I did, also. That is how I found you."



Spock shuddered. The sonic vibration was working on him again, sending slivers of pain through his head, stabbing behind his eyes. Kirk felt it, too... a prickling, irritating sensation, as if his skin were crawling. The empathy between the two men was in full play.

"Is it very bad?" Kirk whispered.

Spock realized his eyes were squeezed tightly shut, and he opened them to see Kirk's concerned face. "This cave shields me somewhat, although the sonics are disconcerting. You are fortunate that the pitch is not discernable to human ears. It is most irritating to mine. I shall have to compensate, but do not trouble yourself on my behalf. There are many things we must consider."

"Yes," Kirk sighed, "like how to get back to the ship." He tried to sit up and gasped with pain. "My leg...how badly hurt am I?"

"It's quite infected, but I have given you an antibiotic which should help." Spock did not mention the probable fungal contamination.

"Spock, is there some kind of intelligence out there?" Kirk looked at the flickering darkness beyond the cave entrance.

"I believe so, but with the sonics affecting me it is impossible to try to make any contact. At any rate, we will have to wait until daybreak before we try to return to the shuttlecraft."

"Return? But the infrared...we won't be able to see!"

"We have your phaserlight, and a portion of one lens is still intact. I am quite proficient at locating tracks."

Kirk heard the tension beneath the carefully optimistic words, and he locked gazes with the Vulcan. They both knew their chances of reaching the shuttle were not good.

Spock's brown eyes softened, and he trailed his fingers gently across Kirk's forehead. "Rest now, Captain. I'll maintain a watch." Kirk nodded, his eyelids drooping.

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Spock roused from his concentrated shielding against the increasing sonic vibrations, aware of a rustling sound. *Jim!* In a moment he was at Kirk's side, touching his hot forehead, feeling bone-rattling chills shake his body.

"Are you awake?"

"Y-yes. I'm freezing," Kirk whispered, trying to keep his teeth from chattering.

"I should have watched you more closely. I..."

"Not your fault... the sonics..."

Spock reached for the hypo, then stopped with his hand poised in mid-air, his eyebrows climbing in amazement. The medi-kit was covered with tendrils of green slime. Filled with growing horror, Spock discovered that the putrescent growth had invaded the interior of the medi-kit casing. He did not dare use any of the equipment for fear of contamination.

Kirk raised himself on one elbow. "How did that happen?"

"When I fell, I must have rolled across just enough of this fungoid growth to contaminate the kit. I see no more evidence of it in the cave. I..." Spock caught his breath. The toe of his left boot glistened with a definite greenish tinge. He picked up a handful of small rocks and scrubbed at it savagely.

"This is one hell of a world," Kirk growled, clenching his teeth as another chill racked him. "How long before dawn?"

"A number of hours yet," Spock said, trying in vain to come up with the exact figures.

The thermal blanket in the kit was also contaminated, so Spock stretched out beside Kirk and drew him near. His higher body heat would at least provide some warmth for his Captain. Wordlessly Kirk clung to Spock, every joint in his body aching. Snippets of dreams mingled with the pain, and reality blurred in delirium. Spock watched the flickering electrical display beyond the cave's entrance and struggled to keep from flinching. The sonics were destroying his concentration, wreaking havoc upon his nervous system. He had to stay alert somehow. Jim might require emergency treatment.

Spock moved his hands gently across the broad, muscled back, stroked the tangled bronze hair, and heard Jim sigh softly in response. There was nothing he could do for his friend, nothing except hold him protectively in his strong arms and wait as the maddening vibrations eroded his control, scrambled his thoughts.

Time stretched endlessly, punctuated by flickering, crawling static electricity, and moans were wrenched from the men huddled in the humid cave. Spock shuddered almost continuously, coughing as the wind whipped offending odors into the cave.

"Spock," Kirk croaked, "are you all right?"

Spock ground his teeth and nodded. "I...I am maintaining my shielding, although with difficulty."

Kirk gasped as fiery pain shot up his leg, and he nearly choked trying to keep from crying out. Spock moved to look at the wound and winced at the sight of the livid infection. No, more than infection... *gangrene!*

"What is it? What's the matter?" Kirk tried to sit up. He didn't have to look at Spock. He'd heard the sudden intake of breath, knew something was wrong.

"Don't try to sit up, Jim," Spock said quickly, making an effort to stop him from seeing the wound, but he was too late.

"My God!" Kirk bit his knuckles hard. He looked at the Vulcan, pleading mutely for a denial of the truth, but Spock could not hide the pain in his eyes. "It's gangrene, isn't it?"

Spock nodded reluctantly. "I'm sure we will get back to the shuttle in time to..." He couldn't go on. The bleak look in Kirk's eyes stopped the useless words, and they stared at each other helplessly.

"Spock..." Kirk bent forward, burying his face in his hands.

Spock took Kirk in his arms, holding him close to his chest, feeling the damp sunbright hair brush against his cheek. He wanted to pull Kirk within himself, heal the hideous wound, repair the rotting flesh, but he could not. A healing trance was out of the question, and combined with a meld, impossible. And even if his mind were clear enough for a meld, it would take days for him to attempt to heal Kirk's leg. By then, if the Enterprise had found the shuttlecraft, the crew would have had to abandon the search for their Captain and First Officer, at least in the immediate area. Even the Enterprise's sophisticated devices could not locate them in the cave... not on this interference-shrouded planet.

"I don't want to lose my leg," Kirk whispered, his face pressed against the soft blue tunic.

"Jim, I'll do everything in my power..." Spock's voice broke, and he squeezed his eyes shut, struggling to pull together the tattered remnants of control. His Captain would lose more than his leg if they did not get aid soon.

"S'okay," Kirk said, "I'll be all right." He could feel Spock trembling, and if the Vulcan cracked, all hope would be gone.

Spock held Kirk a moment longer, then drawing a ragged breath he fumbled for the phaserlight and found its charge depleted by more than the safety margin. Would it be enough to get them back to the shuttle? Somewhere out in the darkness there was another phaser, but Spock knew he would never be able to locate it. As he pondered the odds of finding the lost phaser, he realized that the purple fire dancing about the ground had dimmed, and the air was beginning to swarm with a familiar curling movement. As the ghostly radiance faded, so did the moaning wind, and Spock's lips lifted in a tight, grim smile. At least he would have his mind back, his senses unscrambled, with the dawning of the infrared sun.

"Jim," Spock knelt beside Kirk. "Now that the sun is rising, we must try to return to the shuttle. You will have to try to stand. I'll help you."

"Spock, what about the alien intelligence out there?" Kirk asked, cringing as he struggled to his feet.

"I would prefer not to try to make contact. It is an unknown quantity,

and at the time I sensed its presence I was quite unable to make a logical judgement as to its motives."

"But it led you to me, didn't it?"

"Yes, however, it may have only been positioning us for some other lifeform's purposes. If you will recall, the glow-worms on Cytheria seem harmless all the while they are luring prey into the webs of the swamp spiders."

Kirk took a halting step and cried out as red, searing pain stabbed up his leg into the very center of his being. He would have fallen had Spock not been holding him tightly.

"It's no use," Kirk choked. "I can't walk... not like this. Spock, you've got to give me something out of the kit, fungus be damned."

Spock eased Kirk back to the cave floor and opened the kit, fingers skimming over the slick, wet coating. The hypo was hopelessly filled with the faintly luminous green growth, and Spock would not even think of injecting the alien cells into Kirk's bloodstream, no matter what help the hypo could offer. Considering how quickly the mold had turned the Captain's leg into a darkening, mottled ruin, the thought of placing a similar substance into his body was supreme idiocy. Scraping slime off a spray applicator, Spock selected a medication which should partially deaden the painful wound.

"Jim, I must warn you that I am using this equipment against my better judgement."

"Just get on with it."

Spock leaned over Kirk's leg and sprayed the numbing solution on the inflamed flesh. "Does that help?"

Kirk wiped sweat from his face and nodded. "Let's get going. Better keep that stuff handy, though."

Spock fastened the kit to his belt and stood, one arm around Kirk, with phaserlight in hand and the filter goggles about his head, the fragment of lens a pitifully small peephole into an otherwise featureless world. The heat was growing steadily more oppressive, and Kirk felt perspiration trickling down his neck. Spock found it nearly impossible to steer Kirk clear of dangerous rocks and follow the path he had taken the day before. With both eyes open he could see near-total darkness on one side and only a limited section of the ground through the lens fragment on the other side. Progress was maddeningly slow, and muscles bunched in tiny knots of tension along his jaw.

"Oh! Stop!" Kirk gasped, after over an hour of stumbling blindly in the squalid heat. "I... my leg. I need more of that spray."

Spock lowered Kirk to the ground and prepared the application. The exertion of leading Kirk coupled with breathing the sulfurous air and trying to keep on the proper track was pressing even the Vulcan's physical

limits. Beads of perspiration stood on his forehead, his hands shaking as he tended the Captain's wound. It was hard to see the progression of the infection, and even using the phaserlight, it was not much better. The infrared gloom greedily swallowed morsels of light almost before they could be seen. There was not a sufficient amount of medication left to last Kirk the remainder of their journey, and Spock felt a deepening anxiety. He wondered what McCoy and the others were doing in the shuttlecraft, and whether or not invading tendrils of fungus had found their way aboard... an irrelevant point, he reminded himself. And *where* was the Enterprise?

"Come, Captain, we must continue."

"All right, I'll make it."

Kirk clung to Spock, but his knees buckled, throwing both of them forward, skidding on the blue mold. Kirk grasped blindly for a handhold and knocked the filter lens off Spock's face. The tinkle of shattering glass footnoted their plight with a melodic finality.

Spock grunted as a sharp rock stabbed into his palm with a resulting slow dribble of blood. The darkness was overwhelming, smothering; he suppressed a purely primitive wave of panic. His fingers closed on the phaserlight and snapped its beam back on.

"Jim?" He fumbled across the slippery mold on hands and knees and found Kirk clutching his leg.

"I...I broke the lens, didn't I?" Kirk asked, his words tumbling over each other, laden with guilt.

"It was unavoidable."

"You'll have to go on now. Leave me."

"I...I cannot."

Spock desperately sought a solution. He would carry Kirk. No, that was not feasible. He could not carry him and see the ground with only the aid of the phaserlight. He considered crawling, but Kirk was not able to do even that.

"Spock, go on. I'll stay here. There's a chance you'll make it to the shuttlecraft, and if you do, you can return for me later."

"Jim, no..." Spock bit his lip hard, his slender fingers closing over Kirk's wrist. He could not leave Kirk alone, sick and blinded by the infrared light, even if it meant guaranteeing his own death as well. There was one last possibility.

Spock took a deep breath, almost gagging on the putrid air. "Captain, I shall attempt to draw the attention of the lifeform that contacted me just before I found you. I cannot vouch for its good intentions and may indeed be bringing about our more rapid demise, but I see no alternative. Turn off the phaserlight -- it may keep the creature from approaching."

Kirk could hear the tremor in Spock's voice underlying the formal phrasing. Spock might be able to find the shuttle if he were free to go alone, but Kirk knew the Vulcan would never leave him. For all his professed logic and stability, Spock's secret inner core glowed with emotion and caring.

"Go ahead and try," he said softly.

Spock relinquished his hold on Kirk's wrist and sat cross-legged on the moldy rocks. Rubbing his palms together, he schooled his thoughts into the narrow avenue required for mind touch. He closed his eyes against the curdled air and sent out questing thoughts, seeking, needing. At first there was no response, then he became aware of a light mental touch, of something hesitant, wary. He reinforced the sense of need, summoning.

Something feather-soft, wispy, brushed against him, more delicate than the gentlest breeze. He wasn't sure if the sensation were mental or physical or both. He formed pictures within his mind of their plight, of their search for the shuttlecraft. Then the sensations began... an input of information that resembled more than anything else a patchwork quilt or a jigsaw puzzle.

Kirk sat as quietly as possible, trying to suppress the chills that racked him. Even though he was feverish, he was not delirious; however, at times he wondered if the unbelievable shapes and smells on this world were not products of his illness. He held the phaserlight turned off, as Spock had instructed and wished he could see his First Officer. Spock was only inches away, but the darkness was like a veil swirling about him. Kirk was always uneasy when Spock communicated with aliens via telepathy. The dangers were numerous, and how could he fight something he couldn't see?

Spock stirred, shaking his head slightly. "Captain, I have made contact." He paused, breathing slowly, deeply. "The creature calls itself a Ffleytia; that is as close as I can come to the pronunciation. It will attempt to lead us to the shuttlecraft; however, there is another creature that can present a danger to us. I'm not sure what danger... the thought patterns are vastly different, concepts are at wide variance with ours."

"What is this...Ffleytia? What kind of being?" Kirk asked, staring blindly about him.

Spock hesitated. "I do not know, Captain. I cannot see it. Wispy, light, delicate, asexual... all these are impressions, and it is, of course, non-humanoid. Come, we must go now." He bent to lift Kirk into his arms.

"Spock! You can't carry me. Not all the way back!"

"I shall have to do so, for there is no other way. You cannot walk. If you can manage, hold the phaserlight so that it is readily available. I was correct about the light. It is painful for the Ffleytia, so we cannot use it now. I will attempt to follow the Ffleytia's mental impressions. I must ask you to remain as silent as possible."

Kirk chewed his lip to keep from groaning as Spock hefted him into his arms. The path was incredibly difficult to negotiate, and Spock walked as though he were on a tightrope. The strain of trying to follow the tenuous mind link of the Ffleytia was taxing in the extreme. Spock's breathing was uneven, his face damp with perspiration. In his mind he felt the gentle tugging, the soft encouragement of the alien creature, and he struggled to move faster. He wondered what manner of creature the Ffleytia was, but he had no time to think about it. Just keeping his footing was...

Danger! Spock stiffened as the warning rang in his mind. He couldn't see; where was the threat?

"Captain," he whispered. "The phaserlight -- use it! There is something near. The Ffleytia has warned me and..."

"Spock, look out!" Kirk cried, seeing a dark shape detach itself from the shadows and slither toward them. "Put me down."

Before Spock could move, the column of darkness sprouted appendages, and one of them lashed across the Vulcan's face, wrapping around his neck, squeezing. Spock dropped Kirk, his hands clawing at his throat, finding a slick, tight tentacle beneath his fingers.

Kirk lay sprawled on the ground, phaserlight knocked from his grasp. He struggled to his knees and pummeled the hump of darkness with his fists. Spock was choking, his lungs starving for air.

"Let go, dammit!" Kirk yelled at the writhing mass of slithery tentacles. "Let go, you bastard!"

A tiny stream of green fire erupted from the darkness and encased the attacker in a verdant glow. The thing uttered a shrill wail and fled into the murk, rattling rocks as it went. Spock slumped to his knees, gasping for air.

"Spock! Are you all right?" Kirk reached awkwardly into the dark, trying to find the Vulcan.

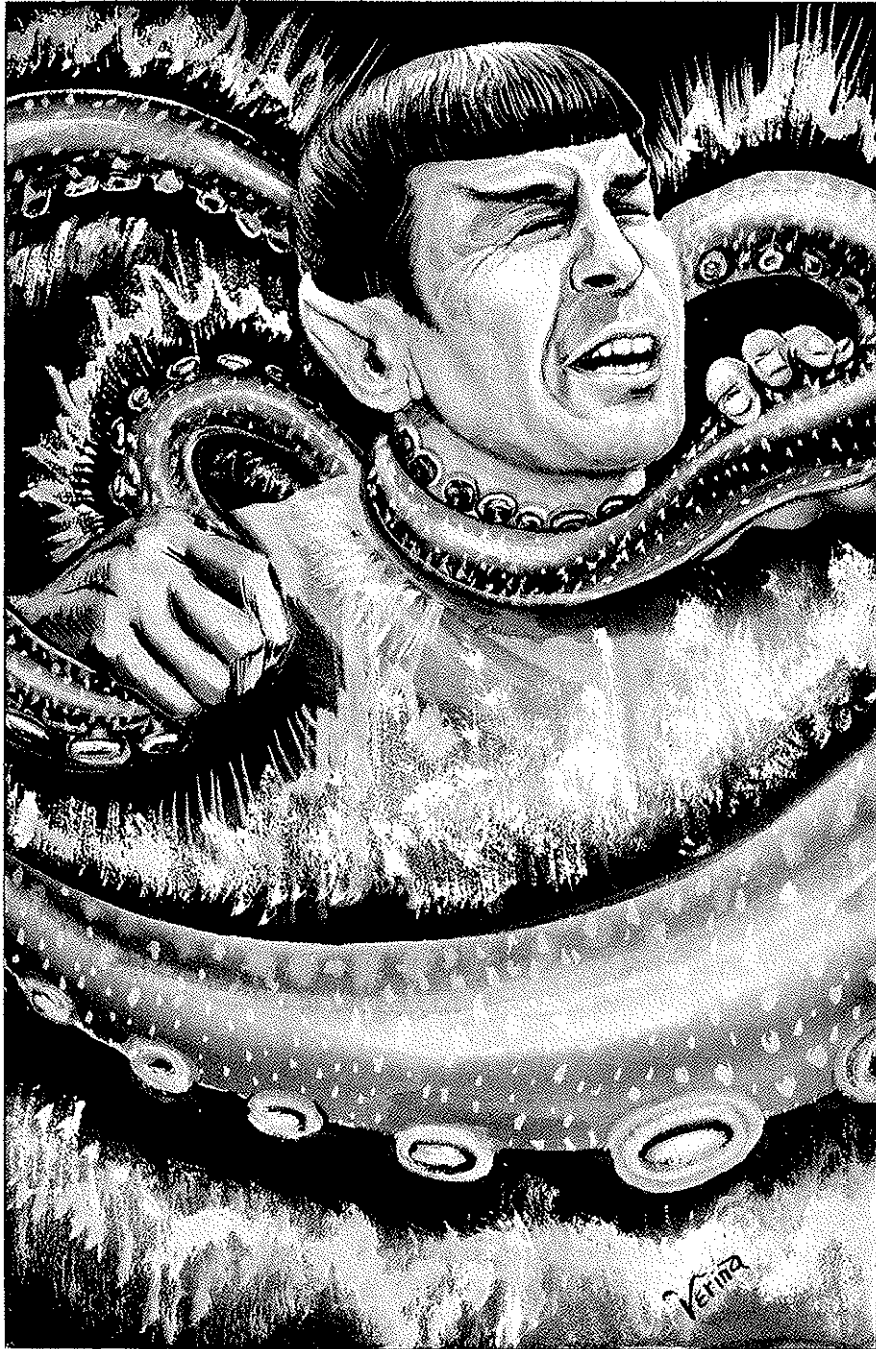
"...stung me," Spock choked.

"Where?" Kirk asked, scrabbling to get the phaserlight. He trained the faltering beam on Spock's neck and saw at least a dozen white, circular marks. "How bad is it?"

"Weak... too weak to carry you... now." Spock paused, trying to renew the link with the alien. "The Ffleytia was responsible for... the attacker leaving."

"You mean it has a weapon?"

"Not mechanical... some natural defense." Spock struggled to overcome encroaching giddiness as the venom spread through his body. "I must communicate again. Cover the light."



Kirk waited wearily. Any hope he had held of reaching the shuttlecraft was gone; the noisome, hellishly hot planet would almost certainly be their tomb. His leg was a fiery agony, and his head ached abominably. Dying in space was by far more appealing than rotting by degrees.

Renewing contact was not easy when the mind was burdened with pain, but Spock drew on his flagging strength to impart the necessary impressions. *Shuttlecraft. McCoy. Come! Quickly!*

Spock suddenly crouched lower on the ground, dry heaves straining him unmercifully. Kirk grasped his shoulders until the spasms were over. He pulled the Vulcan close, edging backward until they were both sitting with their backs propped against the rocks.

"Captain," Spock panted, "the Ffleytia will try to reach McCoy, but it's going to... to..." Spock reached trembling fingers to touch Kirk. "Look."

A white haze appeared in the curling dark and slowly began to take shape ... tall as a man, brilliant white wings with glowing green circular markings, a small oval head with quivering antennae. The wings fluttered as the green spots grew brighter, and a sweet smell filled the humid air as the Ffleytia secreted a luminous golden fluid which it trailed on the ground in a semi-circle around the men. It stopped, fluttering softly, and moved closer to hover inches from their upturned faces. Then it was gone, the white wings fading, as it once again melted into the light of its world.

"Beautiful!" Spock murmured. "Such grace."

"The golden liquid?" Kirk asked, sniffing the pleasant odor.

"Protection from the thing that attacked us, though it is only temporary."

"It smells like honeysuckle."

"The aroma is much like the elantha bloom on Vulcan. I..." Spock grabbed his stomach and moaned.

Kirk trained the weak beam on the Vulcan's shockingly white face. Dark green welts stood out garishly on his neck. "You'll be okay," Kirk said. "You'll see."

Spock pushed the light away from his face. "And you, Captain?"

Kirk was barely controlling the chills, and though he didn't want to admit it, there was something in Spock's tone that demanded the truth. "I can't hold on much longer."

"Nor I." Spock reached slender fingers to touch Kirk's hot face. "Jim, I would not have thought we would perish in this manner, but there is a 94.6% chance that we shall."

"The Ffleytia?"



"There is only a small chance that the creature will be successful in bringing McCoy or anyone to us. It expended much energy in secreting the fluid."

"That's what made it become visible to us?"

"Yes."

The phaserlight chose that moment to flicker and die, the last of its charge expended. Kirk blinked in the sultry dark, unable to see even the luminous semi-circle the Ffleytia had prepared. He leaned closer to Spock, seeking reassurance in physical closeness.

"Spock, can you go into a healing trance... heal yourself?"

The Vulcan did not answer immediately, and when he did speak, his voice was unsteady. "I will, indeed, go into a trance. In fact, I cannot stay awake much longer, but I do not believe I will survive. You see, I cut my hand earlier, and it is in much the same condition as your leg. Even a Vulcan cannot cure all things."

Kirk groped to find Spock's hand, felt the palm struttred with infection, swelled beyond belief, dripping corruption. Kirk's heart sank. He had hoped that Spock, at least, would survive.

"Jim, I suggest you allow me to place you in a light trance, before I lose consciousness. You will be spared any more suffering."

"No, Spock. If help is on the way, one of us must try to stay alert, guide them to us if need be."

"If... if I do not survive, I want to tell you... to say that..."
Spock's voice faltered.

"I know... I know," Kirk whispered, a sob catching in his throat.

Moving as one, each reached to touch the other's face, physical contact being all that was left in the endless dark. Kirk stroked the soft hair, the fringe of bangs, traced the upswept brows, the proudly pointed ears. As he came to the high cheekbones, the firm planes of the angular face, he found hot rivulets of moisture... tears?

"Oh, Spock," Kirk whispered brokenly.

Spock touched his Captain's unruly hair, the perfect nose and expressive lips... the much-loved face that he had looked upon countless times and followed without hesitation to the ends of the galaxy and beyond. Grasping his shoulders, Spock drew Kirk into a tight embrace, ignoring his qualms about emotional display.

Kirk returned the embrace, clinging to Spock, willing time to stand still, wanting to freeze the moment in eternity, to hold back the grasping cold clutch of death. But it was too late. Spock could not deny the inevitable any longer, and his hands dropped to his sides.

"Jim..." he whispered, his head slipping down to rest on his Captain's shoulder.

Kirk shifted his weight so that he cradled Spock's head in his lap, giving the Vulcan ample space to lie on the ground. "Sleep well, my friend, and grow strong," he said softly.

Perhaps he should have let Spock put him to sleep, he thought, staring into the void. He began calling for help, spacing his cries, hearing his voice echo against the wet rocks. After a time, he noticed that the blackness was tinged with red, a fine crimson mist billowing like a fog. *Fever*, some corner of his brain reminded, and then the red mist was shot through with flames that devoured him.

* * *
* *

Heat... pain... a jumble of voices. Hands on his body... probing... jostling... lifting... agony ripping through him...

There was an irritating beeping sound in his ears. He knew he'd heard it before, but he couldn't remember where.

"Jim, can you open your eyes?"

He tried to lift his lids... they were exceedingly heavy... and saw a nurse walking past his bed. Dr. McCoy bent to look into his eyes.

"Bones!" Kirk whispered. "Sickbay?"

"Yes. You're going to be all right."

"Spock?"

"Beside you," a deep voice replied.

Kirk turned his head and saw Spock propped up in bed. One of his hands was bandaged and there was a strip of gauze about his neck. "Are you...?"

"He's all right, too," McCoy interrupted. "Don't you want to know about your leg?"

"*My leg!*" Kirk's eyes widened. "Is it still there?"

Bones grinned. "It wasn't gangrene. It was a fungus infection, and a damn bad one, but we got it in time. If it had been gangrene, it would have probably killed you."

"How... when did you... I mean..." Kirk floundered, still groggy, his tongue trying to stick to the roof of his mouth.

"The Enterprise had just signaled that they'd located us, when I started hearing a voice or words or something. I looked out the shuttle door into that infernal darkness and saw a blurry white thing. I figured I was crazy,

but it seemed to be calling me, and I had a hunch it had seen the two of you. So, to make the story short, a landing party beamed down, and we followed the thing to find you. It's called a Fl...Fl..."

"Ffleytia," Spock said. "It was in the vicinity when we crashed. It was on duty, patrolling or watching in a border area where the tentacled predators flourish. It seems that only mature Ffleytia have the ability to defend themselves; the younger ones require protection. We were quite fortunate that the Ffleytia are naturally ambivilant, and being telepathic, they sensed our good intentions. The one which aided us was a most remarkable creature, genuinely concerned for our well being. Without its help, we would surely be dead."

McCoy rubbed his hands together gleefully. "Well, Spock, you finally met your Waterloo on that planet. Those pointed ears didn't help you a bit; in fact, I'd say they nearly did you in and would have if the sun hadn't come up. And how about those keen eyes? Your night sight didn't work, did it?"

"Doctor," Spock replied, his voice a monotone, "had it not been for my Vulcan mind, you would never have found us. The Ffleytia was following my mental impressions."

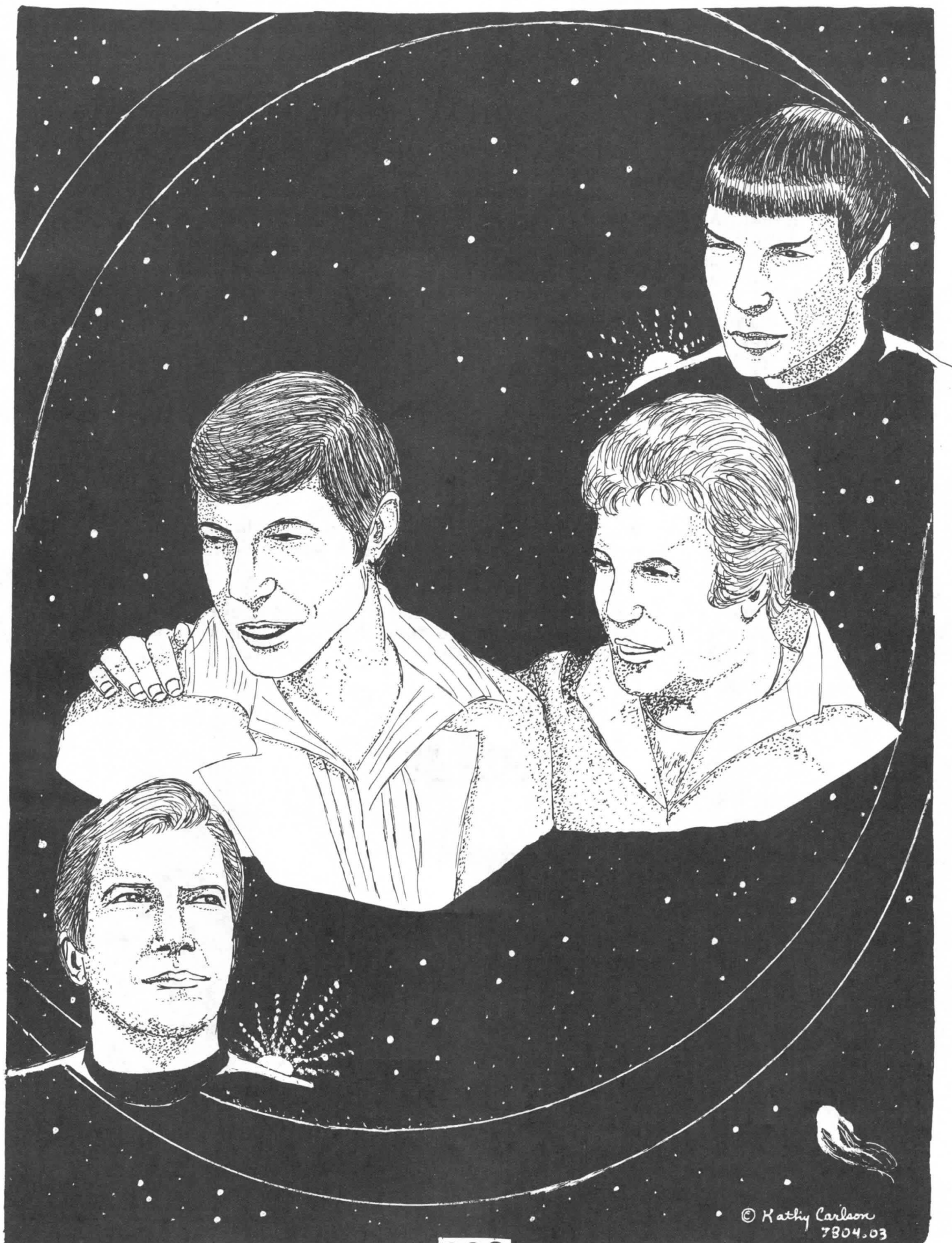
"Nevertheless..." McCoy began, just warming up for a verbal combat, when someone hailed him. A yeoman had broken an arm; help was needed. Reluctantly, he left.

Kirk turned and saw Spock looking at him, his deep brown eyes warm, remembering. Kirk smiled, a glow spreading through his tired body. Not all the experiences on the infrared world had been bad, not bad at all.



The morning steals upon the night, melting the darkness.

-- Shakespeare



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To Fly Again

By Pete Kaup

*Mission canceled
Crew dispersed
He to Vulcan
I to Earth*

*Character changes
Impossible mission
Academies to lecture
Degree to receive*

*With whales I traveled
Music and lights ablaze
Spinning a web that
Covered the kingdom*

*Snatching a white equus
He rode the red hills
While I tried a trade
With tricks to play light*

*Mission return
Great rebirth
He from Vulcan
I from Earth*

Continuum

Out of the midnight sky
The first faint streaks of pink and orange
Promise a golden dawn,
The start of a new day,
Where intangible dreams,
Half formed in the foggy void
Between sleep and waking,
Take root and blossom
Into concrete actions of reality.

Out of the winter land
The first weak shoots of early blooms
Promise abundant spring...
A rebirth of all life,
Where elusive ideas
Nurtured in the long, cold gray
Of forced confinement
And subdued activity,
Grab hold and burst forth
To take the shape of flowers.

Out of the desolate gloom
The first timid sounds of joy and hope
Promise good things to come...
Fulfillment of dedication,
Where silver-bright visions
Kept alive in the minds and hearts
Of the second Creators,
Turn the magical fantasy
Into the new truth of success...
It Lives !!

BEV VOLKER



Contact's Favorite Things

Words BY Nancy Kippax

(A filk to the tune of My Favorite Things)

*Backrubs, massages and wounds in neat places.
Torture, convulsions and blood on their faces.
Touches with tenderness comfort shall bring,
These are a few of our favorite things...*

*Clinches and M.O.'s, omnipotent villains.
Mind-sifters, mind-melds and leeches by millions.
Sighing and groaning and cheeks pressing close,
We'll always go for a few more of those...*

*They must never be unconscious
And should seldom cry.
We'll treat them to agony constant and true,
But never let some-one die.*

*Duststorms, tornadoes and landslides in bunches.
Damp cloths and sponges wipe gently at punches.
Showers - in bathrooms and on planetfalls,
Sometimes a shore leave's most gruesome of all...*

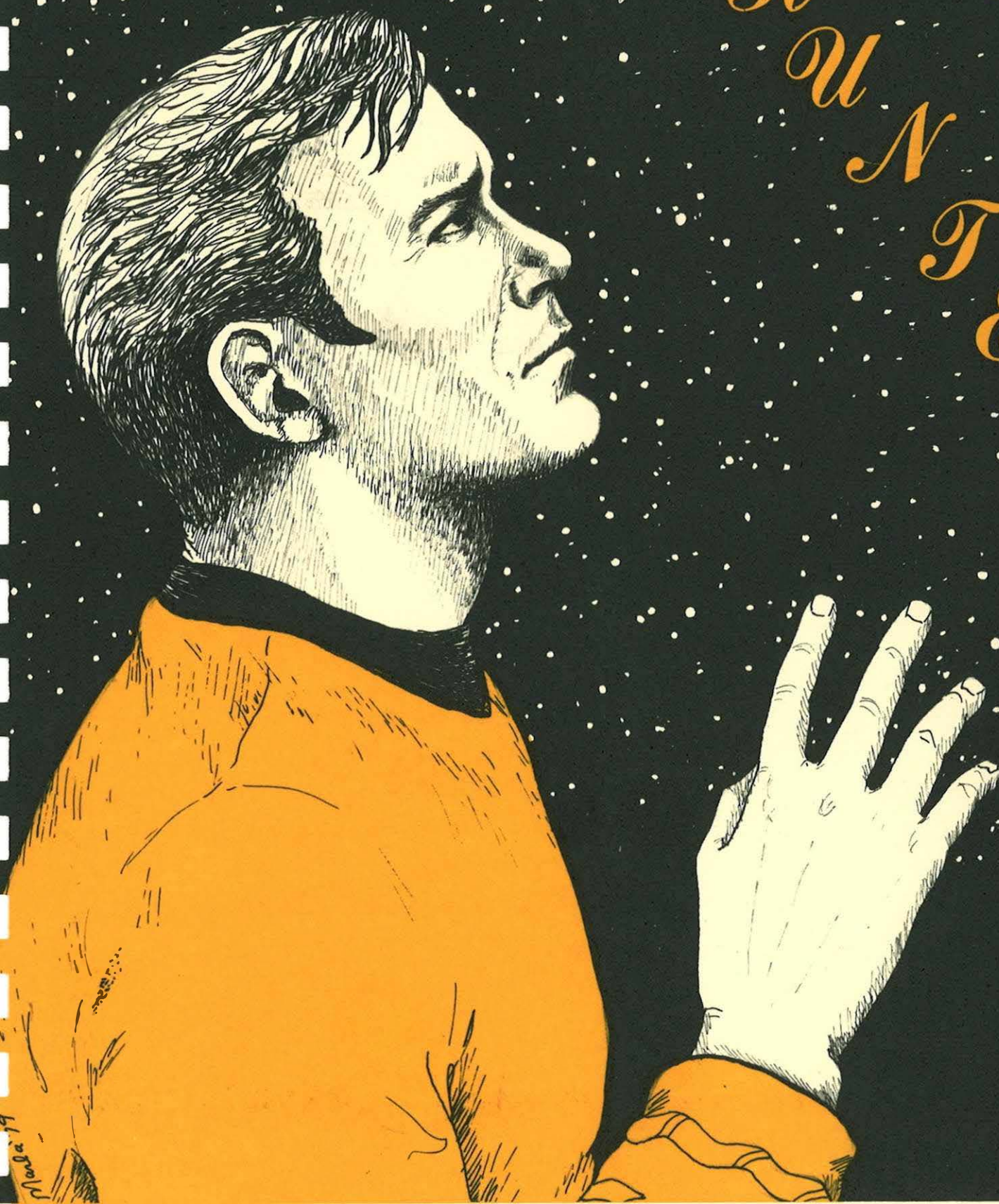
*Blindness and deafness and loss of all senses.
Naked and vulnerable without defenses.
Writhing and vomiting dry, violent heaves,
Oh God, it hurts to see them suffer these...*

*When they're hurting, really paining,
Just make sure they touch.
Stroking and soothing with infinite care --
No, we'll never get too much!*

HOMÉ IS THE



H
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HOME IS THE HUNTER

BY NANCY KIPPAX

& BEVERLY VOLKER

*Home is the sailor,
Home from the sea,
And the hunter
Home from the hill.*

-- R. L. STEVENSON

Lovingly dedicated to

Martha J. Bonds

*Who believed in it and has loved it all along, and
whose encouragement made it possible.*

and

Carol A. Frisbie

*Always available to put her finger on the problem;
her selfless devotion inspires and her love made us
do it better.*

ONE

The large transporter room was a scene of quiet excitement and expectancy as the final preparations were made. Spock stood by the console and surveyed the assembled staff, forcing a calm he did not truly feel.

In moments, the beam-up would be completed, and Spock felt a familiar tingling of responsive nerve endings along his arms and across his back. Emotions whose existence he had always denied vied with each other for first place in his thoughts. Anticipation, anxiety, relief and despair intermingled and became one numbing concern.

Abruptly he faced Captain Harris. "Are you ready, sir?"

"Yes, Mr. Spock." Harris smiled at the First Officer in reassurance, then motioned Chief Kyle to begin. His eyes flashed a question at the Vulcan. Spock had shown him every consideration since he had assumed temporary command of the Enterprise, just as had the entire crew, yet Harris was the outsider here, intruding in their personal triumph. He knew how hard Spock had worked to make this moment possible, yet he could not fault the Vulcan's loyalty to him.

"Mr. Spock -- would you take over the formalities, please." The First Officer's sharp look of surprise rewarded him. Vulcans were trained to read minds; Jason Harris was trained to read emotions and personalities. He had been in Starfleet Command for many years and had held many assignments. From across the width of the console, Dr. Leonard McCoy flashed him a brief, tight smile of approval; Harris nodded.

Very few words were needed. The coordinates were checked and double-checked, the chronometer was consulted. Automatically, the piped-in military music began a slow drum tattoo and the honor guard moved forward as Kyle's hand hesitated over the controls.

"Energize." Spock wondered fleetingly if he had truly said the word aloud. His voice was steady and even. The chilling numbness, the necessary infliction of emotional control was clamped firmly in place.

In the split-second before materialization began, Spock's mind reviewed the nightmare of the past ten months. James Kirk and a select group of fourteen other specialists had been held prisoner by the alien Anthranian government, after their spy mission had been discovered.

Spock, along with the rest of the crew of the Enterprise, had been shocked and angered at the announcement and charges of espionage by the primitive Anthranians. The public list of prisoners had been headed by the name of their Captain, whom they had believed to be on a three week R&R. So secret, so vital to the safety of the Federation had been their mission, that no one had been told until the whole affair blew up messily in the faces of Starfleet Central.

It had taken ten months of negotiations, arguments, demands and counter-demands, while the entire might of the Federation had been held off by the tiny planet of Anthrania. Like an elephant kept at bay by a mouse, talks dragged on and on, neither side relenting, each attempting to save face.

Spock had been instrumental in smoothing away the bureaucratic snarls. The Vulcan had realized the need for haste when sudden 'casualties' had been reported, followed by intense demands for a full confession of wrong-doing by the Federation.

Ultimately, as horror followed horror, the final blow was delivered. Captain James T. Kirk, leader of the expedition, had signed a full confession, had broken and admitted his 'crimes', begging the Anthranian officials for forgiveness. This release was no fraud, no ploy on the enemy's part. After that, Starfleet relented and quickly arranged for the prisoner release in exchange for a public apology.

Yet, what had been done to cause an officer of Kirk's caliber to confess? What atrocities had been perpetrated -- on himself, on his men? Spock knew that the man they were beaming aboard today would not be the man who had been captured ten months ago, and he was frightened by the prospects of the changes he would find. However, his own needs and fears must be sublimated. James Kirk, as always before, would come first; his needs must supersede all others.

Eight figures began to glow and wink on the platform -- the surviving members of the fatal mission. The drum-tattoo grew nerve-wrackingly harsh. The figures became distinct and then they were there -- eight identical drawn faces, eight emaciated bodies dressed in nondescript gray coveralls. Spock saw them only peripherally; his eyes were on the one familiar face in the foreground. Ten months of speculation and anxiety had not prepared him for the reality of the frozen expression in that masked face.

Kirk was thin, his hair long and curling around his neck and ears, and his weight rested oddly on his left leg, giving his whole stance a tilted look. The only reaction he betrayed was an air of disbelief, unreality, as though he could not believe he was actually there. Then his eyes met Spock's and the mask almost crumbled, held firm only through sheer force of will.

Personal reactions were overridden by the military formality of the occasion. Somberly, slowly, every muscle in his body tense with excitement, Spock took one step toward the transporter, locking his hands firmly behind him.

"Captain -- gentlemen -- welcome aboard."

His quiet words unfroze the tableau around him. The men from the Enterprise relaxed, smiled and moved forward in welcome. The men on the platform became animated, stepping down with grins of pleasure and relief. Only Kirk remained sober, regarding his seven comrades carefully.

McCoy pressed past Spock and went directly to Kirk. Like the Vulcan, he was intimidated by the force of his emotions. Gratitude, relief and caution raced through him as he smiled gently at his friend.

"Jim... you're home." He said it as if he could hardly believe it himself.

"Bones..." Kirk's face softened; he looked as if he wanted to say more, yet was distressed because he didn't know what it could be.

"Come on," McCoy soothed. "You and the others are reporting directly to Sickbay for an initial examination. We'll talk... later."

"Good. Wyman... and Landers," Kirk gestured to the two men now remaining on the platform, "need immediate attention. They're... heavily sedated."

McCoy didn't ask questions. "All right. We'll take care of them. Have you forgotten what a competent medical department you have?"

Spock had moved to Kirk's side. As Kirk nodded in acknowledgement at McCoy and started to move forward, he unbalanced and started to fall sideways. Instantly, Spock's hand was under his elbow, the action so swift that it appeared Kirk had recovered on his own.

At that moment, Harris approached the three of them.

"Captain Kirk? I'm Captain Jason Harris, in temporary command of the Enterprise." There was no easy way to introduce himself, and Harris was prepared for an expression of surprise, but none came. He went on. "I know your immediate concern is for your men and for your own health, Captain, so I won't detain you. I just wanted to welcome you back. We're getting underway for Starbase Three, so you'll have about three weeks before your formal debriefing."

"Thank you, Captain. I'm sorry... I can't seem to concentrate..." Kirk apologized mechanically. Harris smiled.

"Don't worry about it. It will wear off once you've settled in, Captain." He addressed the physician. "Dr. McCoy, send me the preliminary reports when they're finished." Harris left.

The transporter room had emptied. Kirk looked about in confusion.

"The others have gone to Sickbay, Jim. Come on, you too," McCoy prodded, placing his hand on Kirk's arm for support.

"I'm all right, Bones. Just... tired." Kirk limped slightly as they entered the turbolift. He tensed apprehensively as the doors slid shut and his eyes took on a haunted look.

"What happened to your leg?" McCoy asked quietly. The normal conversational tone brought a soothing normality to the scene.

"It was broken... when we were... first captured. The Anthranians didn't... set it right away and it never... healed properly."

"Does it give you much pain?"

Kirk seemed startled by McCoy's concern. "Sometimes," he admitted. Then, changing the subject, he turned to Spock. "Harris -- is he a good man?"

The Vulcan nodded. "He has been most efficient and helpful, Captain." Routine questions and answers could be handled without threat to his tentative control.

"Captain Harris was called back into active service to take this command," McCoy picked up. "Even Spock couldn't fill *three* top positions, so Starfleet assigned a temporary Captain. It was Harris who arranged it so that the Enterprise could be the ship to recover you."

They had reached Sickbay and Kirk was looking around in fascination, the warmth of recognition softening his face. McCoy led the way to an examining room and motioned Spock to wait outside.

"Get undressed and get into bed," he told the Captain. "I'll be right back."

McCoy noticed that Spock had disappeared, selected several instruments from his case, filled a hypo and returned to the examination booth. Kirk was lying on his back, his eyes pressed tightly shut. McCoy touched his shoulder.

"Jim?" His voice was uncertain. "This has to be done. Starfleet regulation, you understand. I'll try not to prolong it any more than necessary."

Kirk's eyes opened to stare up at McCoy. "I know. Go ahead -- it's all right."

McCoy began the examination with gentle, experienced hands. He fought down an urge to recoil from the atrocities that the scars implied. Whatever Kirk had endured, subjecting him to this physical examination was a frustrating, emotionally painful extension of the man's memory. McCoy understood and moved quickly with soothing, compassionate touches and quiet, concerned questions designed to reassure and relax his patient. Despite Kirk's apparent aversion to being examined, McCoy's attitude seemed to have the desired effect and some of the tightness eased slightly. He submitted to the doctor's probing, answering questions in a detached monotone. A relaxant and mild sedative made the ordeal easier as McCoy explored the newly-formed scars and multiple bruises covering his flesh. The procedure was over in less than twenty minutes.

At last, McCoy straightened, laying the medi-scanner on the table next to the bed, grateful to be finished.

Kirk raised himself. "Is that all?"

"For now," McCoy conceded past the lump in his throat. He turned back to Kirk, shaken by the glimpse he had just seen of how his friend had been tortured. "Jim... my God, I... " Impulsively, he drew the rigid man's head to his chest, wrapping his arms around the unyielding shoulders. "... none of us *knew*. We suspected brutality -- but this... " His hand began absently stroking the bowed head. "... filthy carnage... "

"It's over, Bones... we made it... " The first touch of emotion lit Kirk's whisper. One analytical corner of the doctor's mind registered the response and he continued the treatment that had caused it.

"Yes... you made it, Jim... " His fingers kneaded the tight muscles at the back of Kirk's neck. "... and you can relax now... let it go... "

Kirk sighed and pulled away slowly. "It's not that easy, Bones. Somehow it's not... " he broke off and shook his head as if to clear it. McCoy saw the subtle difference, the cloud cover the hazel eyes; he stood up, his arms dropping uselessly to his sides. He knew better than to push.

"I'll get you something to wear. I don't imagine you want to put that thing on again," he indicated the coverall.

"And then?"

"You can go to your quarters. You don't have to stay here. I'd recommend rest, though. I'll give you some pills to help you sleep. And I want you back here at 0900 tomorrow."

"My quarters? Are they... "

"Yes," McCoy smiled. "Captain Harris took another vacant cabin. Everything's just as you left it, Jim. Everything," he added meaningfully.

Outside, the doctor was startled to find Spock waiting for him. The Vulcan extended the bundle of clothing he was holding. McCoy saw the black pants, the gold shirt, and suddenly knew where Spock had gone earlier.

"I assumed the Captain would be needing these," Spock explained. McCoy nodded mutely, touched by the simple act of thoughtfulness, and turned to re-enter the room.

"Doctor -- " McCoy heard the plea in Spock's voice and remained where he was.

"All right, Spock. Let's go to my office where we can talk."

McCoy delegated a nurse to take the clothes to Kirk, then sat across his desk from Spock.

"Physically, Jim's in fairly good shape, considering what he was through. He's suffering from dysentery and a rash of skin lesions caused by the filth. There's evidence of repeated beatings, both with sharp and blunt instruments; cracked ribs now knitted, a closed head trauma, some minor internal damage to the liver and kidneys which was treated by the Anthranians." He glanced up at Spock, whose immobile expression failed to betray his reaction. The Vulcan's control lent strength to his own. He went on in the same professional tone. "He's run-down, of course. I've ordered a high-energy compound taken orally over the next few days, balanced with a select diet chart of strength-building foods. His leg will require an operation, but it's not urgent. Next week or so should be soon enough. We'll have to re-fracture and reset the bone, remove scar tissue from the muscle -- it's fairly routine and, I think, the least of Jim's problems."

Spock stood and moved restlessly to the medicine case where he appeared to study its contents. His back was to McCoy as he spoke.

"And the worst, Doctor?"

McCoy heard the despair in the drawn-out words, saw the iron-tight control slipping. He was getting tired of all the repressed emotions around here, his own included.

"The worst involves what a group of primitive aliens may have done to him, psychologically, during ten months of captivity. We're trying to imagine what it may have been like, but none of us can, because it's a situation of which none of us have conscious knowledge. It's been decades -- closer to a century, Spock -- since an incident similar to this one has occurred. The psychological implications concurrent to the physical scarring I observed are... tremendous."

"James Kirk has quite a dynamic personality," Spock defended. "Regardless of what he was forced to endure... "

"Yes," McCoy broke in, "and his will to survive was obviously great. But he *did* break, he did confess, and that's the greatest humiliation to a man like Jim. I'm not sure how prepared he is to deal with that."

"Then what can we do?" Spock turned to face McCoy and the doctor could see the suffering reflected in his brown eyes.

"Be patient. Be understanding. Be *there*." McCoy went to him and put his hands on the Vulcan's shoulders. "As time passes and we learn more, we'll be better equipped to know what to do. I'm just... grateful he's home, Spock. And whatever it takes -- at least now we have a chance."

Whatever it takes, Spock echoed silently. Jim Kirk was safe, he was alive -- the months of waiting were over and now life could begin again.

Spock located Kirk in the wardroom of the Sickbay complex. The Captain was dressed in his regular uniform, and for a moment the familiar image threatened to overwhelm the Vulcan. Kirk was visiting with five of the ex-prisoners who were still being detained by the medical department. Silently, Spock watched the exchange, observing the rapport between the men, the obvious respect which the others held for his Captain.

As Kirk turned to another bed, he noticed Spock in the doorway and gestured him over. The Vulcan's expression softened as he joined the group.

"I was looking for you, Captain," he explained simply.

"I'm glad you found me." He addressed the man in the bed, "Bill, this is Commander Spock. Lt. Bill Pressman." Without waiting for acknowledgement, he led Spock to each of the other men in turn. Commander Marty Anderson, Lt. Commander Victor Garcia, Lt. Jack Langenberg, Lt. Carl Monroe -- Spock was familiar with all of the names, if not the faces. Anderson had been Kirk's second-in-command, and he greeted Spock warmly.

"It's good to meet you, Mr. Spock. Jim's talked about you so much, I feel as if I know you."

"Indeed?" Spock found he was surprised to hear that Kirk had talked of him to these men, and noted an uncomfortable look on Kirk's face as Carl Monroe added, "I guess you could say we were all given a crash course in Vulcan control."

Garcia laughed, a brittle sound, and chimed in, "Sure kept the damned Anties on their toes."

"And helped keep us alive," Langenberg finished.

Kirk smiled weakly and rubbed his hand over his mouth. "Yes, well, regardless of that..." Anderson interrupted him, placing a hand on Kirk's arm.

"You'd better get some rest, Captain. It's been quite a day. We'll be okay." A silent communication flashed between the two men, and Kirk seemed to relax and agree.

"Someone will be here shortly to escort you to quarters which have been prepared for you, gentlemen," Spock informed them. "All of the ship's facilities are at your disposal-- and I trust you will use them to your advantage."

Kirk bid them all a friendly farewell, but Spock noticed how he seemed to deflate once out of the wardroom. It had been a splendid act, a fine performance by their Captain, but it did not hold. Spock walked silently at his side.

"I believe you'll find relatively few changes aboard, Captain," he began, then continued to relate the major events and information in which the Enterprise had been involved during Kirk's absence. He spoke quickly, chattering at a rate extremely uncommon for him, yet with the conviction that verbal assurance was what Kirk needed.

They reached Kirk's quarters at last. The Captain hesitated before lifting his palm to the identi-plate. Spock felt a twinge of empathy with Kirk's emotional reaction. For ten months the cabin had lain dormant, awaiting its occupant's return. How many times had Jim remembered...

Silent now, Spock followed him inside. The door whisked closed behind them. Kirk stood, letting the peace of the room flow through him, absorbing the atmosphere like a sponge. He let his weight shift gradually to his left leg and still he remained motionless, his features molded into the same expressionless mask he had worn all day.

Gently, caught in the same web of reaction, Spock rested his hands on Kirk's shoulders from

behind.

"It is *real*, Captain."

Kirk turned to face him and Spock saw the pretense crumble, saw the agony and fear beneath the surface.

"Spock... my God... Spock..." Kirk closed his eyes and lowered his head. Spock felt the trembling, taut control of muscles held in check. Then the moment of weakness vanished and Kirk straightened, once more the dispassionate officer.

"Come. Lie down now. You're exhausted," Spock observed.

"Yes..." As Spock moved to help him, Kirk cut him off. "It's all right, Spock. I... I think I'd like to be alone for a while, if you don't mind." He met the Vulcan's gaze with a silent plea for understanding.

Spock perceived it would be a mistake to insist. "As you wish." When he reached the door, he turned, holding Kirk for a moment with a look of confidence. "I shall be in the lab if you need me."

Kirk waited until he left. *More than you know, Spock. More than you know.* The words remained unspoken.

For one of the few times in his career, Spock found concentrating on scientific problems extremely difficult. His usually ordered thoughts kept straying to the events of the day, the men who had returned from Anthrania, and one unique individual in particular. Since the Captain had beamed aboard, Spock had had almost no time to spend alone with him, and had been even less able to observe with any kind of objectivity Kirk's attitudes and actions.

While the fact of Kirk's safe return was in itself a measure of satisfaction and relief, Spock nevertheless experienced a sense of incompleteness. He needed the reassurance of Kirk's well-being that only the man himself could give. Too many unanswered questions about the effects of the imprisonment, the future of Kirk's career and his life rose to plague the Vulcan. McCoy's comments after the initial examination did not seem encouraging, and Spock knew that it was too soon to even consider what Starfleet's position concerning the ex-prisoners would be.

Kirk had confessed to leading a spy mission on Anthrania for the Federation. There would be an official inquiry into the events leading up to that admission. Ten months of confinement and concentrated efforts by the Anthranians had exacted their toll. Kirk's and the other survivors' testimony, psychological testing and the whole story of what had happened on Anthrania would be paramount in any decision made. At this time, there was no way of knowing, except by the men themselves, exactly what had taken place, who was to blame, or what kind of repercussions the entire incident might have.

It seemed unlikely that any charges would be brought against the men. In fact, Starfleet had intimated as much in their first contact when they had arranged the officers' release. Yet the problem of re-adjustment and adaptability, the return to their former positions, might stem from the men on whom the long and tortuous ordeal had been inflicted. As leader of the mission, James Kirk would have shouldered the responsibility for its success or failure, for the lives of those involved and for his own actions. Whether or not this would have a lasting effect on his eventual reinstatement as commander of the Enterprise was still an unknown.

Spock chided himself. Logically, he knew he was being impatient, pressing for answers that would have to be worked out in time. Yet he had been frustrated and nervous about the stranger wearing Kirk's face who had been returned from Anthrania. They had been forced by circumstances to assume their roles of Captain and First Officer, and Spock had been agitated that he had not been able to see through the mask Kirk wore to the essence of the man beneath.

After several unsuccessful hours, Spock gave up his attempt to work. He knew he would ~~not be~~ able to accomplish anything until he had a chance to see Kirk, talk with him, not as

Kirk's subordinate officer but as the friend who had waited ten long, agonizing months for this day.

Kirk had not sent for him, yet perhaps the need was there. Spock left the lab wondering how to approach Kirk without intruding. They had not needed explanations before, but much had happened in that time Kirk had been gone. Kirk had experienced things that Spock could not even begin to comprehend. Yet he must try, he must start somewhere. He headed toward the Captain's quarters.

Just as Spock was about to buzz Kirk's cabin, fate intervened, to thwart him again. A problem came up in the computer section and Spock was pressed into duty. It was troublesome and time-consuming, and Spock chaffed at the delay. When he was finally free to leave, the hour was quite late -- too late to make a casual call. Kirk would no doubt be asleep.

The route to his own quarters took him directly past Kirk's door. He hesitated. Jim had been on board for almost twelve hours and they had spent approximately five minutes together. The illogic of waste hit Spock, filling him with a fierce determination.

If he buzzed, and Kirk were sleeping, the noise would wake him... silently, he lifted his palm and the door slid open.

A cry pierced the darkness. Swiftly, Spock approached the sleeping alcove. Kirk, in a tangle of sheet, thrashed wildly.

"No... Get them off!... Get them off of me... !! Don't... no... Get them off..."

Spock grasped his arms, pulled him to a sitting position, shook him by the shoulders.

"Jim..."

"No! ... getthemoffgetthem..."

"Jim!"

Suddenly, the incoherent babble stopped, the wild-eyed frenzy abated. For an instant Kirk was motionless as he stared at the Vulcan without comprehension. Then, recognition dawned, releasing the memory of the nightmare. He shuddered, the effect claiming his whole body in wracking tremors that were noiseless and frightening in their intensity.

Spock was so shaken that his own hands trembled. "It's over... it's all right," he intoned softly, trying to offer some reassurance, the backlash of the nightmare washing over them both. His Captain was hurting, needing him, and he struggled to bridge the chasm, to erase the shadows of their recent separation. "Easy, Jim... you're safe now... just a dream..."

As Kirk gradually quieted, the quakes subsiding to a light quiver, he began to talk, broken sentences that chilled Spock with their implications.

"... no way out... they had thousands of them... the punishment room... put me in with an army of those damn, alien insects... all over me... no place to hide, no place to -- go... crawling all over me... couldn't get away... like little scorpions..."

Spock wanted to hush him; he didn't want to hear it, couldn't bear the pain it brought to Kirk's voice, yet he suspected the act of telling could help Kirk.

Kirk made an effort at control, gripping the Vulcan's arms. "Spock... Spock..."

"I'm here."

Kirk moved away. More coherent now, Kirk seemed uneasy, almost embarrassed by his outburst. Spock sensed the withdrawal yet refused to be put off. "Here -- turn over," the Vulcan instructed. Spent, Kirk allowed himself to be helped on to his stomach, was still as Spock straightened the quilted sheet over him in such a way that his back was exposed. Spock's movements were sure as his fingers began a gentle, kneading motion across Kirk's shoulders.

"Spock... don't..." The feeble protest was whispered with an air of desperation.

"I am able to alleviate some of your tension. It would be illogical to resist, but I can call Doctor McCoy if you prefer." Spock took Kirk's silence for acceptance. "Then, I suggest you relax. Allow yourself to concentrate only on the tactile sensations... focus your thoughts on the area I am touching... Good... yes..." Spock's voice droned soothingly, lulling Kirk to peacefulness. His fingertips worked gradually down Kirk's spinal cord. In the dim, almost non-existent light, Spock could see the scars which criss-crossed Kirk's back. He hesitated, and his fingers traced the pattern in the air above the puckered flesh, reluctant to touch them directly. With a renewed ache, he resumed the massage. The therapy seemed to be working. He could feel Kirk responding, feel the pressure receding. Then he made an error.

As he kneaded the cluster of muscles at Kirk's waist, he slipped the sheet down farther, to reach the base of the spinal column. Abruptly, Kirk flipped onto his side and grabbed Spock's wrist with a halting motion.

"That's enough! Don't..." Abashed at his reaction, Kirk's eyes slid away from Spock's face. There was a tense moment while Spock tried to determine what he had done wrong. Kirk broke the silence, awkwardly. "Anyway, I feel better now. Can we... just talk for a while?"

"If you wish."

Suddenly, the desperate attempt at control fell apart. Kirk doubled on his side, pressing his face against the bed. "Oh, God, Spock."

Spock hesitated, then sat on the bed and deliberately drew the resisting form toward him, enfolding the coiled man in his arms, shielding him protectively as the human tried to stem the uncontrollable reactions.

"Jim -- talk to me. Tell me..." Spock was pleading now, made desperate by the lack of communication. "Don't turn away. Let me help..."

"Spock, I *can't*. I'm sorry. It's been so long and... I... almost can't believe I'm... here. I need... time. Can you... understand?"

Spock nodded against the huddled figure. "I am trying." They clung for a few seconds, then Spock felt Kirk pull away and released his hold.

"I know you are. It isn't easy, is it?" He sat back and looked at the Vulcan. "Spock, I'm... glad you're here."

Spock struggled to find his voice. "Jim, what you went through..."

Kirk stood abruptly, almost angrily. "I said not now, Spock. I don't want to discuss it."

"You said you wanted to talk."

"Not about Anthranian!" His voice softened at the hurt in Spock's eyes. "Oh, damn, Spock, I spent ten months there. It's over, past. I lived those months for this day when I could come back. All day I wanted a chance to tell you... tell you..." he faltered, embarrassed. "Please, don't spoil it by bringing that place into it."

Spock turned away. "I'm sorry."

"Shit!" Spock looked up abruptly at the bitterness in the word. "It's not working, is it? Nothing is right... the way it should be. You come offering help, trying to be my friend and I... lash out at you."

"I have intruded."

"No, no you haven't. It's not you... it's me. I'm the one who's lousing up things. I can't seem... seem to do or say anything I want... need... to..."

"As you said, it will take time." Spock succeeded in projecting a calm, supportive tone.

"You think so?" Kirk grasped hopefully. "Yeah, maybe that's it... maybe in time I can... face... accept... what I... what I had to... to do." He covered his eyes with his hands, shutting

out the images so near to the surface of his mind.

"~~Had~~ to do, Jim," Spock emphasized. "Remember that."

Kirk looked skeptical, then smiled, accepting. "You always have all the answers, don't you, Spock?" he asked quietly.

"Hardly... "

"I suppose you would have known just what to do, would have made all the right choices. They... they wouldn't have been able to... to get to you. You and your Vulcan control would have... resisted."

"Jim, that is not... "

"Logical, Mr. Spock? No, but very little about this whole affair is, I'm afraid."

"I was going to say that is not a valid deduction. One cannot predict with absolute certainty how he will perform under an unknown set of circumstances."

"Oh, and I performed magnificently." Kirk's voice was edged with ice. "Aborted the mission, lost half my crew, told them what they... what they wanted to know."

Spock was alarmed at Kirk's tone. He shook his head. "To blame yourself so... " he began in wonder.

Kirk shrugged. "Forget it, Spock. I thought we'd decided we weren't going to talk about it. Anyway, it's my problem. I was in charge of that mission and I'll take the responsibility for what happened."

Spock nodded. "You always do. Even though it was a mission in which you did not wish to participate."

"How do you know that?"

Spock sat on the bed. "I recall the day you left for your alleged 'leave'... Something you said to me which made no sense at the time. You said, 'One of these days, Starfleet is going to push me too far.' I assumed you were in need of a rest. Later, I understood."

Kirk rubbed a hand across his eyes. "Yes. But that was a long time ago. The service doesn't ask us to like what we're told to do. I still had no right to... "

Spock sighed. "It is late, Jim. There's no need to tax yourself with this right now. Lie down. Did McCoy give you something to help you sleep?"

"I don't want to sleep. The nightmares... "

"I can free your mind of those, if you desire." Spock made the offer tentatively, not wanting to impose. His earlier certainty that he would know how to help Kirk had evaporated. To his relief, Kirk smiled at him.

"Even that -- you would do for me, wouldn't you?" He nodded slowly, accepting Spock's offer. Soon, he was quietly asleep.

- 2 -

During the next few days, Kirk went through a series of treatments, minor surgery and exercises to restore his depleted physical condition. He endured the unaccustomed attention

with the same air of detachment with which he confronted most other areas of shipboard life. A vague worry that he was not more concerned with the happenings on his ship surfaced on the fringes of his consciousness, but somehow he could not generate a lasting, sincere interest in what was taking place. He seemed to exist in a state of limbo, preoccupied with his immediate past and drawn toward the eventual outcome of the impending debriefing. Neither her Captain, nor truly a passenger, Kirk viewed the daily routine of the Enterprise with a sense of unreality. He was in another time and place. He went through the motions, responded to acknowledgements from the crew, gave the expected replies and exhibited the proper demeanor. Yet he continued to feel as though it were some dream in which he did not belong. And even more disturbing was that he found he did not really care.

Once or twice he tried to voice his uneasiness to the ever supportive, ever listening McCoy, but he found it difficult to put into words, difficult to express in terms the doctor could understand, how the experience on Anthranian had affected his ability to view things in the same way he had before his capture. McCoy, Spock, others aboard the ship, had no reference with which to comprehend the atrocities he had seen. Only the seven men who had returned with him could understand, and Kirk shared a unique empathy with them that existed nowhere else.

Yet McCoy insisted on talking with him, and Kirk did not object, although he very subtly allowed the doctor to carry most of the conversation. It was during one of these talks with McCoy that he learned of the circumstances surrounding Harris' appointment as temporary Captain.

"I was surprised -- I thought Spock would be in command when I returned," Kirk had commented.

McCoy shifted uneasily in his chair across from Kirk. "Three top positions is quite a strain even for Spock," he hedged.

"That's true. Harris seems like a competent officer." Kirk had the feeling that McCoy was being evasive.

McCoy shrugged. "Well, I suppose you'll hear about it sooner or later, anyway. Spock ~~was~~ in command, at first," he admitted reluctantly. "Then... he was injured on a landing party detail. We were near Starbase Three, and that's when Harris was beamed aboard. Spock was concerned, at first, until he learned it was only an interim appointment."

"Spock was injured?" Kirk picked up. "He didn't mention that."

"Of course, he wouldn't. He was laid up for over a month, though. We were pretty worried for a while."

Kirk was thoughtful. He couldn't remain passive about the news of Spock's injury. All those months on Anthranian he had held on to the image of Spock, his ship going through maneuvers, engaging in explorations. He had not allowed himself to think of the possible dangers he knew existed in starship service. But they had faced them all the time. Spock could have been killed while he had been gone, might not have been here for him to come back to... he pushed the unsettling vision away.

"He's all right now?"

"Yes, he's fine, Jim," McCoy assured. "I certified him completely recovered. He's been back on regular duty for several months."

Kirk fidgeted, standing to pace the room. "Damn... I wasn't here."

McCoy sighed. "I anticipated that reaction. That's why I was reluctant to tell you."

"Don't pacify me, Bones. Is there anything else you're reluctant to tell me?"

"No, and I'm not pacifying you. I just felt you could use a little time to get used to the idea of being home before you were filled in on all the details of what happened while you were gone. Why don't you sit down?"

Kirk hesitated, then relaxed and took the doctor's suggestion. "I guess I haven't gotten used to the idea yet."

"You will." McCoy was confident. "It will all fall back into place. Once you're able to get it out and put what happened in its proper perspective, James Kirk will be back in that

command chair before you know it."

"A medical prediction, Doctor?"

"And a friend's prediction. Just remember, Jim -- I'm here, if you need me. I'm not going to spoon-feed you with platitudes or give you any sugar pills, but I'm behind you and I'll try to understand."

Kirk smiled, a glimmer of the old spark which made McCoy ache with a sympathetic despair. McCoy wished there were more he could say, more he could do, but he knew the value of caution. Kirk stood up.

"Will you have dinner with me tonight?" he invited.

McCoy smiled. "I'd be honored, Captain."

The following day, partly because of McCoy's insistence that he needed to talk about Anthrania, and partly because it would be a necessary aid during the Starfleet Inquiry, Kirk resolved to begin a series of tapes logging the events from the time of their capture until their release, as accurately as his memory would allow.

"... On the third day of our captivity, the Anthranian Commander, whom I've mentioned before, indicated that we were to be transported to the permanent camp, even those of us with injuries. Michaelson was still delirious, and I tried to make the guards understand that he should be allowed to remain at the hospital, but they either didn't understand or didn't care. The journey, in a primitive steam-engine land vehicle, lasted about twelve hours. It was a closed cabin, no windows and very little air. Michaelson died en route..."

Kirk hesitated, remembering the moment, feeling the rough jouncing motion of the ride, his leg throbbing with each bump. He could smell the foul odor which permeated all of Anthrania, a musty, sulphurous stench which never abated. Keith Michaelson had died hard, screaming for help in his delirium. All the men had done what they could to ease his pain, but his death had been inevitable. A man didn't live with injuries as grave as those Michaelson had sustained in the initial capture...

The sound of his buzzer shut off the unpleasant images, yet Kirk was surprised to feel his nerves jump at the neutral sound. It took him a moment to reply.

"Who is it?"

"Spock, Captain. May I come in?"

Kirk used the button on his desk to unlock the door. It was an automatic response and he felt pleased that he remembered it. So many little details of civilization seemed to have been forgotten.

Spock entered and the doors closed behind him. "My duty shift is over, Captain, and I thought perhaps you might need something."

"Need...? No, but come, sit down." Kirk pressed his fingertips against his eyes. "I've lost all track of time with this report," he admitted.

"You should not overtire yourself," Spock chastized.

"It has to be done," Kirk retorted. Then a faraway look came into his eyes. "It's strange," he mused, "how everything seems heightened now. Things which I... which I once took for granted, when denied to me, became extremely important. Things which I accepted

as natural, or never really thought about... " He broke off.

"The bridge crew was asking about you again today," Spock tactfully changed the subject. "They had hoped you would come up for a few moments." Knowing Kirk's state of mind, Spock and McCoy had cautioned Kirk's friends to allow him to make the first move. They had complied, tacitly agreeing to wait.

"Maybe tomorrow," Kirk promised, aware that he was hedging, putting it off, yet he couldn't explain his reluctance to visit the bridge. He had thought of it often enough, back on Anthrania -- thought of it, dreamed of it. No doubt McCoy would have an explanation for his attitude. That reminded him of something else.

"Spock -- it wasn't fair to hide the fact that you'd been injured while I was gone. What happened?"

The Vulcan's eyebrow rose. "I made no attempt to hide it, Jim. It was merely irrelevant to our conversations. We were attacked by predatory carnivores on Lita 12. I lost my footing in a struggle with one of the beasts and it, and I, arrived rather abruptly at the bottom of a mineshaft. Now that you know, perhaps you can see why Captain Harris was assigned." There was a silent plea for absolution.

"Of course. Did you think I'd doubt your loyalty?" Kirk smiled ruefully. "I'm just glad there was no... permanent damage. You really have to learn to be more careful, Spock."

"The hazards of space service..." Spock began, then broke off, realizing what he was saying and to whom he was talking.

"Yes," Kirk returned bitterly, "I know."

"Jim..."

"It's all right," Kirk dismissed.

"If I hesitate, it is because you have been reluctant to discuss your confinement on Anthrania and how you regard it."

"But you have questions?" Kirk asked quietly.

"You will answer them in your own time," Spock assured.

"Yes." Kirk stood up and paced the floor, his awkward gait painfully apparent. "I've been making some log tapes on the subject. Bones thought it would be a good idea to help me vocalize what took place. You're free to listen to them, if you choose, of course."

"If that is what you want," Spock agreed.

"It might be easier," Kirk explained. "Spock, it's not that I don't want you to know what happened, what it was like. I know you deserve to know. But it's very difficult to discuss..." The tapes were factual. There was no way he could describe to his friends how it felt to live one day at a time, concentrating on complex concepts like how to sneak an extra bit of food back to the cell, or how to phrase a reply so that it both told nothing and did not enrage the inquisitor into inflicting another punishment, or how to cover excretions so they didn't have to walk in it...

Kirk was aware of the Vulcan watching him intently, a look of sorrow on the eloquent features.

"Jim, we never stopped trying to free you. It took so long..." Spock's composure began to crumble.

"Perhaps too long, Spock." Kirk looked away, naked and fearful under the pain-filled stare. "Too long for me, anyway. You wanted your Captain back. I'm not -- "

"I wanted James Kirk back," Spock cut in fiercely. "A man I can respect and admire, no matter what his station or rank. You can be whatever you want to be."

A spark of the old determination, the force of personality, burned in Kirk's eyes. "When I find that out, you'll be the first to know."

Kirk's buzzer sounded, making a reply unnecessary. When the door opened, Marty Anderson entered. He looked surprised to find Spock there, then smiled self-consciously.

"Marty -- come in," Kirk beckoned him over.

"I don't mean to interrupt, Jim. I just wanted to let you know that we're planning a little celebration tonight in Rec Room Six, and the men are hoping you'll be there," Anderson explained. Spock listened closely.

"A celebration," Kirk repeated slowly, understanding that Anderson meant the men who had been with him on Anthrania. "All right, I'll be there. I suppose we *should*."

Anderson met his eyes gravely. "Captain, we've got to start living again." He broke his own intensity with a smile. "A few drinks, a little entertainment... can't do any harm, right?"

The man's casualness forced Kirk to return the smile. "No indeed, Commander."

"Good." Anderson turned to go, then stopped short. "Oh, by the way, can you tell me how to get to the gymnasium? They said it was on Deck -- "

"Eight," Spock supplied. "I am leaving now, Commander, and would be glad to show you." He caught Kirk's eye and the silent interchange indicated that their conversation had ended.

Anderson watched the subtle communication, then turned to Spock. "Thank you, Commander. I'd appreciate that. Jim... I'll see you tonight."

Kirk nodded and the two men stepped into the corridor. Quietly, Spock led the way to the turbolift. Finally, Anderson spoke.

"Mr. Spock, this returning to... civilization... it... it is going to take a bit of adjustment for all of us."

Surprised by the other man's candor and not certain how he was expected to reply, Spock's answer was non-committal. "I am certain that everyone expects that, Commander."

Anderson frowned. "Forgive me if I'm speaking out of line, but I couldn't help noticing the look that passed between you and Jim just now. I got the feeling that I'd interrupted a private conversation and I must apologize.... "

"Unnecessary, Mr. Anderson," Spock tried to interrupt.

Anderson regarded him curiously, then went on. "I understand that you are the Captain's friend, and I just wanted to warn you not to be too hard on him or expect too much of him so soon."

Spock felt he was on the edge of something but he forced his voice to remain calm. "Why would you believe that?"

"Jim's not himself, hasn't been since... since the Anties told us we were being released. I know he was just as anxious as the rest of us. All Jim talked about was getting back to his ship -- coming home. He had kept us all going -- cheered us, bullied us, looked out for us. And he had it the worst, because he was our leader. He got most of the punishment, the interrogation... you can't imagine what it was like, no one can. Civilized men reduced to animals..."

Spock was stung by Anderson's words, and waited for him to continue.

"I don't know how he held out as long as he did. He told us he was practicing 'Vulcan control.' One time when they beat him so badly, he was delirious, he... thought I was you, I guess. He kept saying, 'Pain is a thing of the mind, Spock... I can bear it...' I often wondered what you must really be like. I didn't think we'd ever get to meet each other."

Spock found it difficult to get a reply past his constricted throat. "I am pleased that we had that opportunity, Commander." They reached the gym. His voice softened a little. "Thank you for your concern for the Captain. I will remember your suggestion."



Anderson smiled. He seemed about to say more, but Spock motioned pointedly at the door.

"This is the gymnasium. If you need any further assistance... "

"No. Thank you, Mr. Spock." Anderson pressed for entrance as Spock turned back down the corridor.

Anderson was a good officer, Spock reflected. He was grateful that there had been someone on Anthranian Kirk could rely on. *When I was not there*, he thought ruefully, *and I should have been.*

Later that night, Spock was sleeping lightly when a noise in his cabin roused him. He lay still, listening, and in a moment he heard another sound, louder this time. Something crashing.

"Oh, shit."

The familiar voice brought him off the bed in one swift motion. Almost cautiously, he stepped to the end of the screen divider and looked around the room. He could make out Kirk's form in the dark, and was surprised to find his Captain sitting in a sprawled position on the floor by the desk. A large potted plant was overturned beside him.

Quickly, Spock dialed up the light. Kirk looked at him in confusion.

"You've moved the furniture." The accusing words were slurred.

"No, Captain." Spock moved forward to assist Kirk to his feet. He caught the strong odor of alcohol as Kirk leaned heavily against him, trying to gain his balance.

"Mnn... room seems different," Kirk mumbled, frowning. With one hand, Spock pulled out the desk chair and managed to guide Kirk's unresisting body into it. Only then did he take a breath and straighten.

"Did you want something, Captain?"

"Yes, I... " Kirk faltered, then shrugged. "I don't know. There was a reason... " he broke off. "Can't you turn that light down a little? Hurts m'eyes... "

Spock paused to upright the plant, then dialed the light down to a dim glow. "I assume you enjoyed the party," he remarked, bemused by the unexpected amusement of the unusual visit and Kirk's rather uncharacteristic state.

"We had to carry Langenberg back to his cabin," Kirk chuckled. "He was... totally inpa-- incaca--insta... he had too much."

Spock reflected that Kirk was in no position to pass judgement, but he refrained from voicing it. "Jim, it is quite late. You should get some rest yourself."

"Did I wake you?" Kirk seemed surprised, as if just realizing what had happened. "Sorry, Spock, I was... I was going to... oh, hell," he finished disgustedly, leaning over and resting his forehead on the desk. Then he stood unsteadily. "I don't want to bother you... I'd better go... "

Spock reached to catch him as he lurched forward, almost falling again when muscles failed to cooperate. Kirk shifted his weight to look at Spock, their faces only inches apart.

"I think I'm drunk."

"Indeed." Spock wrestled with a solution to the predicament. Should he try to get Kirk back to his own cabin, or would it be better to let him sleep it off here? And why had Kirk come here -- what did he need?

"That's all right, Spock." Kirk broke away from Spock's grasp and sank unceremoniously to the floor. "I'll just lie here for a while..." He curled on his side, bringing his knees up to his chest.

Concerned, Spock stooped beside him. "Jim, you cannot sleep on the floor. Come, let me help you to the bed."

Kirk's face twisted with some private agony. When Spock reached a hand to touch him, he drew away, huddling tighter into himself. "No... don't..." he pleaded. "Let me alone."

"I won't hurt you," Spock assured steadily.

"I know. It's all getting... confused."

"Let me help you to the bed," Spock insisted.

"Floor's okay. I don't need... luxury. Did without a bed for ten months..." Kirk opened his eyes and focused with difficulty on Spock. "You disapprove, don't you?"

"Of what?"

"Sleeping on floors... getting drunk. I'm not hurting anyone."

"You are hurting yourself. It is unnecessary," Spock reproved mildly. Kirk shut his eyes again, blocking him off. Resigned, Spock rose and got a blanket and returned to Kirk's side.

Kirk had wanted to come here, was trying to reach out, but he didn't seem to know how to accomplish it. Kirk had been unable to respond naturally, and Spock was at a loss to overcome the barriers.

Gently he spread the blanket over his Captain. Kirk looked over at him, his eyes glazed.

"You shoulda' stayed longer at the party."

"Jim, you know that I do not enjoy that kind of..."

"Doesn't matter. Uhura was there," he admitted painfully, "after you left. Harris asked her to come and sing."

"That must have been pleasant," Spock affirmed cautiously, warned by the look on Kirk's face.

"She's a beautiful woman. And she was so... sweet, so glad to see me. I spirited her away... took her up to the observation deck. She was so nice, and I tried... I tried, but I couldn't *feel* anything. She knew... I know she did." Kirk rushed on, throwing an arm over his eyes. "We talked... I tried to make conversation with her, touched her... but I was still dead inside. Nothing. Why am I so cold inside? Why can't I feel? The Anties took my dignity, took my soul..."

"Jim..." Aching, Spock leaned over and placed his hands on Kirk's shoulders. "You must allow yourself time to adjust. If you truly had no emotions, their absence would not disturb you so greatly. Trust me in this."

"Trust... you," Kirk echoed woodenly. As if in acquiescence, he canted his body slightly toward Spock. "Don't ... leave me."

"I shall remain," Spock assured. He hesitated as Kirk's features slackened in stupor, then he carefully stretched out on the floor beside him.

"...I was removed from the others for interrogation. The isolation cell was about eight by ten feet, no light or furnishings, with one metallic pot for eating and washing. Any protests on my part were met with either uncomprehending stares or violent assaults. They allowed me little sleep or rest, however. Most of that time was spent in the 'examination room' being questioned.

"I... I'm not sure what they wanted to know. The Anthranian officer in charge was Ghi. He spoke Standard -- the only one there who did, it seems. Ghi assured me that the rest of the men were being cared for, but refused to let me see them or give me proof of their safety. I feared they had been killed. He spoke of... reprisals... if I failed to follow his instructions but I... I couldn't understand what he wanted from me -- it changed every session. He wanted information on the Federation, he wanted to know... many things about our customs and politics. Then he would tell me he knew all about us, and prove it by disclosing some innocent fact of protocol or culture. He wanted me to denounce the Federation, admit that we had been on an espionage mission into their territory, and pointed out how superior they were to us. At first, he implied that I was to be killed. Punishment was inflicted by guards with primitive weaponry -- hollow tubes, elastic clubs, long thin needles...

"I was told later that I was gone about ten days. We had no real way to measure time, and in isolation I lost track completely. After the first several sessions with Ghi and his guards, I found it impossible to eat the rough gruel they offered. When they attempted to force me to eat, I decided that they did not want me dead -- at least, not yet. That fact was both heartening and discouraging. It meant that there was hope for release, yet it also prolonged the ordeal of their treatment. Of course, throughout those first weeks, I think we all expected instant retaliation by Starfleet and our Federation..."

Kirk leaned back, clicking off the recorder, afraid that he was allowing too much bitterness to show through in his report. The mission had been a mistake from the beginning, yet he knew as well as anyone that it had been necessary. Still, he was uncertain why it had taken ten months to secure their freedom.

His desk communicator beeped and he reached across to open the channel. McCoy greeted him cheerfully.

"Jim, you're late. Did you forget we have an appointment?"

Kirk frowned, remembering the cosmetic surgery McCoy wanted to perform. It seemed like a waste of time, but he had said he would comply.

"Sorry, Bones, I guess I did. I'll be right down. Kirk out." He switched off the viewer quickly, before his face betrayed his disapproval.

Still pondering over his report, he headed for Sickbay. So much had happened in ten months, some of it indelibly written in his memory, but most of it a blur of timeless uncertainty. He found it difficult to list the events in true chronological order and there was much he preferred to forget.

And McCoy was concerned about removing a few superficial scars.

"Good afternoon, Captain." McCoy was waiting for him, his arms folded across his chest.

Kirk nodded absently. "How long will this take, Bones?"

"A couple of hours, perhaps. Why? Am I interrupting something?"

"No... just my damn report."

"It'll wait. I understand you had quite a party last night," McCoy reproached gently. "Sorry I had to miss it, but that's the price of being a doctor. I felt that emergency with Alton from engineering needed my personal attention."

Uncharacteristically, Kirk did not inquire about the crewman's condition. He wondered, though, how the doctor had heard about the events of the party. Had Spock told him...? No, Kirk decided. It had probably been one of the other officers. Fleetinglly, he wondered how many of the Enterprise personnel had seen him staggering through the corridors.

"We overdid it a bit," he admitted. "I've lost my tolerance for the stuff."

"Understandable," McCoy smiled. "Now, come on, relax while I run this skin sample through the computer and then I'll be ready to start."

"This... surgery, Bones... I won't have to be asleep, will I?" Kirk shuddered at the thought of a drugged stupor, losing control even to a small degree. Even being drunk last night bothered him and he hadn't planned that.

McCoy looked at him curiously. "No. A local anesthetic is all you'll need, Jim."

Kirk relaxed, knowing that his fear was irrational, yet unable to suspend it.

In a few moments, McCoy was ready to begin the procedure, his professional expression masking his worry and concern. As he administered the anesthetic and instructed Kirk to lay on his stomach, he was freshly aware of how much of the story of Kirk's captivity was etched on his body. As a doctor, he could see things which, as a friend, he would have had no wish to know. The sufferings and indignities this man had been forced to endure were physically evident. The emotional scars could only be estimated.

Carefully, he inspected the criss-crossed lines on Kirk's back. The original wounds must have been about a quarter of an inch deep. There were many, as if inflicted on separate occasions, too thick to have been made by a whip -- perhaps a razor strap or a similar device had been used.

"How old are these scars?" he asked gently, curious. Kirk made a shrugging motion with his shoulders.

"Does it matter?"

McCoy began to peel away the puckered epidermis, which would be replaced by fresh cells that would eliminate the scar tracings.

"I think it matters to you, Jim, or at least it should. If you try to bury your memories they'll only emerge in the future."

"And so the object is to accept them first, then forget them. I haven't forgotten my basic psychology, Bones," Kirk's voice softened. McCoy frowned; there was a world of difference between knowing and doing.

The doctor worked silently, brooding. Kirk's own intelligence was against him in this case. A physician or psychologist could only help to guide his patient. The major portion of Kirk's cure must come from within himself.

Unexpectedly, Kirk began to talk. "The beatings were stopped after.... I made the confession tape. The Anthranians knew they'd better return those of us who were still alive in workable condition. Before that, it was... regular, daily routine assaults."

McCoy laid down his laser needle and ran his fingers over the repaired skin, stalling, trying to think of something adequate to say. He knew that the Anthranians had been very careful not to inflict any permanent injury on the eight men whom they had returned, but that did not justify the seven whom they had killed. And Jim Kirk, he knew, had died a little with each of them.

"Jim, you survived. You managed to save seven of your men. For a while, we feared you'd all been killed," McCoy said at last. Then, continuing the restorative procedure, he lowered the sheet and ran the scanner over Kirk.

The recorder showed a history of multiple small ruptures in the anal canal, complicated by infection and evidence of previous severe dysentery. Only the residual traces were left now, and proper diet and clean environment would effectively treat the condition, but the cause of the rupturing worried McCoy. Sexual molestation was a possibility, although McCoy suspected

there was something more to it than intercourse.

Kirk grew tense as he sensed the direction of McCoy's concern. His mind struggled to avoid the memory, but the doctor left him no choice.

"They left you very little dignity, did they?"

"Body searches," Kirk replied tightly. "Almost every day, they... looked for concealed weapons."

... He was ordered to strip, knocked to the floor, hands pinned behind his back. One of the guards yanked his head back by his hair, stuck several grimy fingers into his mouth, probing, jabbing halfway down his throat. He choked, shuddering as the ordeal was repeated on his nose and ears. If he struggled, he knew they would hit him and start at the beginning again. Next they searched his armpits, poking roughly with stiff, dirty fingers. Then, he would be forced to his knees, his forehead shoved against the floor, hands held in place at the back of his neck. Someone held his ankles as he tensed, knowing what was next. His body arched, struggling to break free as the pain radiated up his spinal column and through his midsection. Agony pulsated as the fingers pushed, stabbed, dug into him. It was always the same, and always ended with a violent kick as hands released him and he sprawled, exhausted and trembling, forced to gather up his filthy clothes and cover himself...

Kirk shivered as the tortured memory held him and McCoy pressed his shoulder. "You have every right to be bitter, Jim, but don't let it destroy you," he cautioned fiercely.

"I would have killed them if I'd had the chance -- and taken pleasure from it."

McCoy didn't answer, but he knew what it took to make a man like Kirk admit such a fact about himself. A small warning bell seemed to clang at the back of his head. Perhaps the wounds from Anthrania went deeper than the physical scars implied, deeper than McCoy himself at first suspected. And if that were true, then readjustment could be far more complex than any of them had anticipated.

Thoughtfully, he moved his hand to the back of Kirk's neck and squeezed the knotted muscles. "I know," he murmured. "I know..."

Days passed quickly aboard the Enterprise, as Kirk tried without success to set a pattern to his time. Something was invariably interrupting his routine and he needed little persuasion to set aside his report on his captivity and to concentrate on the present.

The men who had been his fellow prisoners sought him out frequently, coming to him with questions and problems similar to those he faced himself. Kirk was able to suspend his own searching and tell them what they needed to hear, but it gave him no comfort. They still looked to him for the leadership he had given them on Anthrania, though, and he felt obligated to at least try to respond. Marty chastized him for bearing their burdens, but Kirk knew that Anderson was extending the same hand where ever he could. A good second-in-command, Marty Anderson would be a good Captain someday, if Anthrania had not ruined his career.

Evenings were most often reserved for Spock. The Vulcan was the only one with whom Kirk felt completely comfortable, for he asked no questions, made no demands. Kirk knew he was poor company for anyone right now, yet Spock patiently joined him after each duty shift, uncomplaining.

McCoy set a date for the surgery on Kirk's leg. It would mean confinement in Sickbay for two or three days, but Kirk anticipated the end of his bothersome limp. He was gaining strength, feeling healthier, and on the day before he was scheduled for surgery, he decided to visit the bridge.

It had been ten days since he had come aboard, and still he had not entered the ship's nerve center. He knew it was expected, and part of him ached to be there again, yet he loathed

the thought of putting on another hollow performance... the stoic starship captain, excited to be back and itching to take command... *Stiff upper lip, James T. ... an example for the crew.*

It was as he had expected it. The same scene which had focused in precise detail in his mind for the past ten months was now laid out before him exactly as it had been before he left. The only change was that now Jason Harris occupied the command chair.

He doesn't belong here... but then, neither do I. Neither... do I? An image flashed in his mind, the filthy prison ward on Anthrania, Jon Wakefield in one of the upper bunks, moaning, the keening sound mingling with someone else's muffled sobs. He smelled the stench, tasted the grit in his mouth, saw Wakefield's thin, pleading face like a living corpse. Kirk's stomach lurched as he felt a hand touch his arm and he drew back, startled.

"Captain?"

It was Spock, solicitously at his side. The illusion was dispelled, and Kirk drew a deep breath, realizing where he was.

"Good morning. I hope I'm not interrupting anything," he replied smoothly, steadily. He could see the crew beaming, eager to greet him, as Harris stood and approached.

"Not at all, Captain," Harris answered. "We've been expecting you."

What followed was a blur, devoid of emotion, as Kirk moved from station to station, gathering warm welcomes and fielding questions on his health and plans for returning. He was aware of Spock's quiet support as the Vulcan accompanied him, and he was grateful for it.

They would have had him stay, but he concluded his visit quickly and moved toward the turbolift, marvelling at his own indifference to the scene. He knew he should feel joy, relief, a sense of homecoming, but he only felt awkwardly out of place and uncomfortable. As he reached the solitude of his own quarters, Kirk released a sigh of relief. He allowed the quiet of the room to permeate for a few minutes, calming the tension he had felt, though not shown, on the bridge. As he began to relax, he let his mind drift over the scene he had just played. He had actually done quite well, exhibiting the proper reactions and enthusiasms, and the crew had been genuinely delighted by his presence, showing off their skills and abilities for him.

Yet even though the outward signs were all correct, he had felt empty inside, out of touch and out of synch with the busy, bustling hub of his ship. He had felt Spock's eyes on him, watching, supporting, ready to cover if he faltered. He hadn't, but once... once there on the bridge the memory of Anthrania had threatened to intrude, claiming his attention away from his surroundings.

Kirk walked over to his desk and sat down, staring at the recorder. He remembered. Pressing the button to start the machine, he found his voice and forced it to sound objective.

"... Three guards came in at night, as was their habit, to select a prisoner at random for interrogation. This time it was Jon Wakefield whom they grabbed, probably because he was sleeping. The strange fever he had contracted had left him weak and incoherent; we had all been nursing him as best we could for days, reluctant to have him sent to what the Anthranians considered a 'hospital'. Anyway, when the guards dragged Jon off his bunk, Arne Lomax shouted at them to stop, to take him instead, but they pretended not to hear. We all tried to make them listen and they became hostile, knocking me down and pushing Wakefield forward. Lomax... became enraged -- I'm not sure how it happened, but he struck one of the guards, taking him by surprise and it was... in moments all of us pressed our advantage and charged the three guards. We were past reason, past rational action... it was... I don't think we were even considering escape at that point, we were just striking back blindly for all of the... We didn't stand a chance. The guards managed to back out of the cell, slamming the door on us, and they ran off. We laughed... a bitter moment of triumph, for we knew we'd have to pay for the fracas. Lomax and I got Wakefield back to bed and then we all waited.

"Not much later, they were back -- seven of them this time, heavily armed. They opened the cell door and one of them beckoned to Lomax. When he refused to cooperate, they dragged him out... keeping the rest of us at bay with their weapons. They weren't taking any more chances...

"All night, we heard his screams down the hall. No one slept. Toward morning, the sounds subsided, and the silence was more ominous than the noise. At least, we told each other, Arne

had finally lost consciousness. We... told each other that.

"They came back for me. I was led to the interrogation room, searched... then Ghi entered. Still furious, I tried to explain that his guards had provoked the fight by picking on Wakefield. He listened, but remained impassive. I was led down the hall to one of the punishment rooms as Ghi lectured on how they had been forced to teach us a lesson, that we were to learn obedience.

"In the room was the mutilated body of Arne Lomax. He was hanging by his ankles on two chains suspended from the ceiling. There was blood... everywhere, and the corpse was... almost unrecognizable. They had... he was literally skinned alive and his face was torn and...

"Again, Ghi told me that it was my responsibility to keep the men in line, to avoid resistance and to... confess to our wrongdoing so we could be sent home. Lomax had been killed to set an example..."

Kirk switched off the recorder and dug his knuckles against his eyes, trying to blot out the frightful vision which his report had conjured. Crossing to his bed, he lay down, knowing he could not continue the taping.

Lomax had died for trying to protect Wakefield, yet his efforts had been in vain. Wakefield had succumbed to his illness two days later, his eyes beseeching help up to the last minute. After that night, Wakefield had lost his will, stopped fighting.

Abruptly, Kirk rose and headed for his shower, needing the cleansing for both body and mind.

Four days in McCoy's Sickbay had produced both positive and negative results for James Kirk. The surgery had been successful and even the doctor's 'mother-hen' tactics had been therapeutic and relaxing. Back in his own quarters, after having been pronounced recovered earlier in the day, Kirk flexed his leg cautiously, pleased that even the residual tenderness of the operation was diminishing and awed that the constant limp had practically disappeared.

The time in Sickbay, surrounded by the daily hustle of routine and stream of visitors, had given him a respite, very little time alone to think, remember. He had been forced to keep up his 'captain' appearance and he found that in itself lifted his spirits. James Kirk was back and on the mend.

Yet now, suddenly returned to the vacancy of idle days, time to be alone, and the necessary resumption of finishing his log-tapes, Kirk was reluctant to have the details of Anthranis surface again. All day he had put off recording, understanding that he was procrastinating, and knowing he could not delay much longer. The trip to Starbase Headquarters was almost completed. In a few days he would have to face the official inquiry.

The buzzer sounded. Kirk glanced at the chronometer and his features relaxed. He crossed quickly to the desk, pressed to open the door and admitted the expected visitor. Spock was punctual as usual.

"Captain," Spock greeted him eagerly. "I am pleased to see that the doctor has released you from Sickbay."

Kirk nodded. "Miracles of modern medicine, Spock -- don't ever take them for granted."

"Indeed. I spoke with Doctor McCoy earlier, and on his approval, I took the liberty of reserving a gymnasium room tonight. I thought you might find some exercise beneficial."

Kirk frowned in consternation. In his present mood, he hardly anticipated freefalls of a strenuous workout. He knew it would do him good, however; he certainly needed to work on his muscle tone.

"All right. Just for a little while, though," he agreed.

They worked independently, side by side, for nearly an hour. Most of the time, Kirk gave himself over in furious concentration to accomplishing the goals he had set. He was annoyed at the limitation of his ability, driving home the extent to which his body had been deteriorated.

Occasionally, however, he paused in his exertions to steal a look at the Vulcan's activity. Kirk watched, amused and intrigued as always by the interpretive Vulcan gymnastics which combined powers of mind and body to achieve a level of dexterity unsurpassed by any race. Some of the positions Spock managed to attain were little short of unbelievable.

Finally, Kirk jumped down from the bars. He could feel the tremors in the muscles of his legs and arms that warned him not to overdo this first time. He slipped to the floor, breathing hard, sweating, and marvelled again at the Vulcan's quiet, serene poise and ability. A rush of warm affection overcame him; Kirk felt a sudden sting of tears form behind his eyes; if only this moment could go on forever.

He forced out a light question. "Do you think I could learn that?"

Spock's voice seemed distant, ethereal. "I have been practicing since I was two years old. I doubt you could attain my degree of proficiency, Captain." Then he unfolded himself, stretched and spoke normally, studying Kirk thoughtfully. "However, if you care to learn, I shall be most happy to instruct you -- "

Kirk smiled. "No, thanks. I'll stick to the regular gym equipment." He pushed the damp hair back from his face. "And I can see that I'm going to have to be a regular visitor here. I'm really out of shape."

Spock handed Kirk a towel as he dropped down beside him on the floor. *Not a drop of sweat on him*, Kirk thought ruefully as he wiped his own face and neck gratefully.

"Thanks." Kirk leaned back and sighed. He continued to look at Spock with a glint of amusement in his eyes. "This reminds me of... how it was. It seems so long ago."

"Indeed. Perhaps it is illogical to say that time passed slowly, but it did. At least here, routine was a buffer which helped to alleviate..." Spock broke off, still awkward at expressing an emotional state. This was one of the rare times that Spock had mentioned his own quiet agony during Kirk's absence.

"I know," Kirk said softly. He wanted to touch the Vulcan, wanted to ease the deep furrowed lines between his eyes, to reassure. Instead, he only sighed and repeated, "I know."

"Jim," Spock began slowly, "we will arrive at the Starbase in six days."

"Yes, I'm aware of the schedule, Spock," Kirk replied, irritated by the reminder. He didn't want to think about the debriefing, the necessary interviews with Starfleet. He felt the peace of this precious moment shattering as he was forced to look ahead, to anticipate.

"Captain, I..." Spock seemed uncomfortable, tense. "I wish to accompany you when you leave the Enterprise. I can arrange to take the time..."

Kirk looked at him carefully, catching and interpreting the subtle nuances of the request. *These past ten months... they haven't been easy for you, either, have they, my friend? You feel it, too... this need to share, to be together, to make up for all the time lost to us...*

Suddenly the ordeal that was ahead of him didn't seem quite as foreboding. Spock had offered to be there, to be with him. He paused, still hesitant about accepting such a gift.

"I don't know how long it will be, Spock. I don't even know if I'll ever be coming back. Can you understand that?"

"Yes. We will deal with each day as it comes."

The vow of unity touched Kirk more deeply than he could say. "I will be... pleased to have you with me, Spock. I... want you with me."

James Kirk passed through the large, blue marble archway which led into Starbase Three Command Headquarters. Early for his appointment, he had come alone to begin his debriefing in the prescribed military manner.

Just past the entrance was the central lobby, decorated with the banners and plaques standard on every base in the galaxy. Kirk paused, the powerful, awe-inspiring atmosphere kindling a warmth deep within. On the wall directly in front of him hung an enormous UFP banner. Next to it was the flag of Starfleet Command, equal in size. So close they were almost touching, the two standards bore a silent testimony of unity and support between the two organizations. To Kirk, they were the visible expressions of everything in which he had ever believed -- justice, loyalty, the power of right. He felt the familiar stirring of pride, knowing this was his chosen course.

After living beyond the sphere of Federation influence for ten months, Kirk had come to cherish these symbols of freedom in a way few would ever experience. How many times he had yearned for the sight of anything connected with his home!

Yet even as he stood, enjoying a sense of homecoming, a pall fell over the giant flags. His pride diffused, and Kirk wondered if there was anything left in which to believe.

Have they changed -- or have I? Starfleet -- military arm of the mighty Federation -- was the organization he had sworn to uphold by oath and by belief. Now, after Anthrania, his oath had been shattered and his belief badly shaken. James T. Kirk -- lofty idealist. He had learned what one small planet could do to ideals.

His ambivalent emotions were extremely painful. Seeking an answer, he moved on. Past the flags was a long, irridium plaque, almost glowing with a shimmering golden patina. Engraved above a list of names were the words: STARFLEET MEDAL OF VALOR. A smile touched Kirk's lips as his eyes ticked off the well-known names at the top of the list. Admiral Ernest Trudeau, Commander Zachary Thompson, Commodore Oren Blain -- men whose daring exploits and bravery had been inspirations to him as a child. He had grown up on tales of such heroes, food for an impressionable mind. Trudeau, who was one of the founders of today's Starfleet, was the first man to be appointed an Admiral by the Federation High Council. Thompson, a decade or so later, had been awarded the Medal of Valor posthumously, after leading a successful attack force against an alien invader from a distant galaxy. Blaine, aboard an earlier model Starship, had assumed command after his Captain's death and won a decisive battle for the Federation during the Romulan wars.

His eyes drifted down the list, nearly every name telling a familiar story, all required reading at the Academy. Captain Hilary Danton, for example. He had been instrumental in securing a peace treaty between the Federation and the then-hostile Tellerites. Diplomacy above and beyond the call of duty and a devotion to peace had won him his Medal of Valor.

Heroes... all of them heroes. All of them caring more about the Federation than their own personal safety or well-being. Legends... the really great men. The ones I wanted to emulate....

And I did... once. There, near the bottom of the list, he saw it: Commander James T. Kirk.

A wave of panic hit him with jolting force. I don't belong there -- not on that list. Oh God, what a travesty, what a mockery. James Kirk -- hero. He felt sick.

"Captain Kirk?"

The unexpected voice at his side startled him. He tensed, drawing away from the sound, then firmly clamped down on his control and turned to greet the speaker.

"I'm Commander Cray Lattimer of Starfleet Intelligence, Captain. Have you been waiting very long?"

"Just a few minutes. I didn't expect a reception committee, Commander."

Lattimer smiled warmly. Only a few years younger than Kirk, he was a slightly built blond with twinkling, deep blue eyes. "I'd be pleased to escort you to the Admiral's office, sir," he invited.

Kirk nodded, still preoccupied with trying to control his dissonant emotions. Lattimer spoke easily as they traveled through the building.

"I'll be assisting Admiral Iblen in the debriefing, Captain, acting as advisor for Internal Intelligence. We're relying on statements from yourself and the rest of your men to glean a true picture of the total situation on Anthrania."

"Of course."

Just outside the door to Iblen's office, Lattimer paused, facing Kirk intently. "I don't think I have to tell you, Captain, how pleased we all are to have you back."

You should have been pleased ten months ago, Kirk thought bitterly. Memory intruded, pushing back the barriers of time and place.

... Kirk called the twelve men into a huddle around him in the darkened cell. The long trip across Anthrania had worn on them all, and the prison at which they had arrived was like something out of a nightmare. Kirk took the reins of command easily, yet he was forcing an optimism he didn't really feel. His leg, with its crude, makeshift splint, was throbbing painfully and the heavy alien food combined with the atmospheric stench of the planet was making his stomach cramp.

"All right -- listen to me," he ordered, stilling their anxious whispers. He kept his voice low, even. "This seems to be our home for a while," he observed, indicating the small, dingy cell. "The Anthranians still don't know how we got here or what we were doing -- not anything that they can prove, anyway. I know it's been a rough trip, but we're going to have to continue to cope with the situation for a little while longer. By now, Starfleet's been notified and..."

"How long do you think it will take them to arrange our release?" Lt. Bill Pressman interrupted, his young face pinched with fear. Kirk regarded him steadily.

"I don't know, Bill. I can't tell you that. It may take several weeks before we hear anything." He heard the expected groans, yet knew they had all been prepared for that answer. Communications combined with bureaucracy to cause a bottleneck in cases like this one.

"In the meantime," he addressed them all, "I expect strict adherence to Starfleet's code of conduct. We'll survive this ordeal if we work as a team and stick to our established routine discipline."

"Captain?"

"Yes, Arne, what is it?"

"Do we... fight back? Cause as much trouble as possible?"

Kirk frowned thoughtfully. "No. Not for now, anyway. We can't escape -- where would we go? The Federation is trying to secure our freedom. Just be prepared to deal with the Anthranians' hostility, and to defend yourself when necessary without jeopardizing those efforts. We won't start anything -- yet." He paused. "Any more questions?" He didn't have to explain what he expected from them; these men were all trained professionals and had been selected for this mission on the basis of their psyche profile as well as on their skill and ability.

"Sure hope the Federation moves their asses on this," Landers grumbled.

"They will. Just hang on, Harvey..."

Kirk slipped back into the present with the bitter taste of betrayal on his tongue. Who could have predicted that it would be ten months, and that five of those who had made it to the prison camp would not live to return home.

Dimly, Kirk heard the introductions and cleared his mind to face Admiral Azir Iblen, commander of Starfleet Intelligence, the man who had signed his orders for the Anthranian mission. The aging man was a legend in his own right, with one of the most admired reputations in Starfleet. It seemed fitting, in a strange kind of way, that he would conduct the debriefing, Kirk mused.

"Sit down, Captain Kirk," Iblen invited. "Cray, is your equipment all set up?" Lattimer nodded and Iblen turned back to Kirk. "First, let me explain a few things -- off the record. We're using a new sensitized computer tape with electromagnetic properties which functions as both a verifier and a reaction gauge. Don't feel uncomfortable about it -- you probably won't even know the machine is on, but it's designed for Starfleet's protection, so that someone can't come along and say this session was rigged, or that prepared answers were given. We still have this mission coded Top Secret with a Need to Know binder, and only a very few key individuals will have access to the file." He smiled encouragement. "We have a pretty good idea of what aborted the mission and of subsequent events -- some of which perhaps even you are not cognizant. What we're after is the official, first-person account. Are you ready to begin?"

Just like that, Kirk thought. *All right -- be precise, detached, controlled.* "Yes, Admiral; any time you are."

Iblen cleared his throat. "I want to acknowledge into the record the receipt of these requests for commendation which you've submitted for your crew, Captain Kirk. There are... seven posthumous, seven others, am I correct?"

"Yes."

"I'll see that they're passed along the proper channels. Now then... will you explain, in your own words, what instructions you were given and the purpose of your mission to Anthrania."

For an instant, Kirk had a sharp mental distortion and he imagined that this was Ghi seated across the desk, some grand illusion tricking his senses into betraying the vital information. Locked inside of him for so long, Kirk had difficulty finding the words.

"Is something wrong, Captain?" Lattimer asked, concerned. The computer was registering an extreme stress reaction. Then, it gradually returned to normal.

"Nothing, Commander. I'll try to be brief. I was assigned to command a special scout ship, outfitted for an espionage fact-finding survey of the independent planet of Anthrania. Because the planet borders Federation territory, and because there was an unexpected attack on Federation property with suspected Klingon support, Starfleet needed to discover whether or not the Organian Peace Treaty was being violated. We were to establish Klingon involvement in the military escalation on Anthrania, and to bring back evidence and data to substantiate such a claim." Kirk's mouth tightened with displeasure.

"How many men in your crew?" Iblen prompted.

"Fifteen including myself. All trained specialists, yet only two were familiar with intelligence procedures." Kirk could not resist the accusation.

"All Starfleet officers are taught such methods, Captain. Many have actual field experience -- yourself, for example," Iblen defended.

Kirk remained calm. "Agreed. But only Lieutenants Damon and Reed were from Intelligence section. Computer experts and communications officers don't usually get this sort of exposure."

"What is your point, Captain? Are you implying that the crew was badly chosen?" Iblen's voice was probing, not accusing, though Kirk knew the Admiral had been the one responsible for the selection.

"I'm just trying to explain why I feel the mission was in jeopardy before it began. The crew performed with exceptional skill, yet our presence *was* discovered and our ship attacked. Some of that has to be blamed on improper training in espionage activities."

Iblen tapped his stylus on the desk and was silent a moment. Then he spoke. "All right. Your point is noted and we'll come back to it later, but right now I want to move on to another question."

Damn, Kirk swore. They still don't want to face it, to admit they may have been in error.

"Admiral," he persisted, "why weren't trained intelligence officers sent on this mission? Why does Starfleet consistently use its starship personnel on activities outside their jurisdiction? When the Enterprise was sent after the Romulan cloaking device -- "

"That wasn't my province," Iblen demurred, interrupting. "Although I suspect it was a matter of suitable personnel -- your Vulcan First Officer was in a unique position. But let me say something concerning the Anthranian mission. The sad fact of the matter is that we simply do not have enough skilled professionals in any one bureau of the fleet, Captain. Overlaps are necessary, and in most cases, highly expedient. We selected the best men available for this extremely sensitive mission. There was also, you may recall, some degree of choice involved. No one was pressured into accepting the assignment."

No, Kirk conceded silently. But when the fate of the entire galaxy was at stake, when one's superiors were talking about innocent colonists being attacked... was there ever a choice?

"You had another question, Admiral?" Kirk prompted, changing the subject.

"Captain, you were, of course, unable to return the evidence you were sent to find." Iblen's voice grew earnest. "However, I'm asking now: did you discover Klingon involvement on Anthrania?"

Kirk sighed. "Yes, we did. Our sensors detected a Klingon warship docked behind Anthrania's artificial satellitestation. There was evidence, on that station, of extremely sophisticated, Klingon-design equipment being installed. On the satellite as well as on the planet, armament was being produced at an alarming rate." He paused, recalling the chilling implications of their discovery and then what had followed.

"Commander Dale Reed and Lieutenant Keith Michaelson were selected to go in closer to the planet in a shuttlecraft. What evidence we had collected was not sufficient to tie together the escalation and the Klingon presence." Kirk went on slowly. "Several hours later, we received a distress signal from the shuttlecraft, and almost simultaneously we were surrounded by an Anthranian patrol with tractor beams locked on to our craft.

"We fought back -- so did the two men in the shuttle -- but the Anthranians had slipped up on our dark side and we never stood a chance. The shuttle was severely damaged -- Reed was killed and Michaelson badly wounded. The scout ship sustained only minimal damage, although several of the men were injured, and when it became apparent that we were going to be beamed down, I set the self-destruct sequence in motion. Minutes after we materialized on the planet surface, the ship exploded."

Iblen let out a pent up sigh. "Then the scout ship did not fall into Klingon hands after all."

"No -- we destroyed it ourselves, sir."

"Good. I was hoping that was the case. It's what the Anthranians told us, but command still feared that the Klingons had confiscated it. We had some pretty special equipment on that ship."

"Please continue, Captain Kirk," Lattimer urged. "According to your log tapes, you were taken to a medical facility first. What did you observe there?"

"It wasn't a regular hospital," Kirk tried to explain. "We were beamed down to a military installation which contained a large infirmary section. We were handicapped by our inability to speak the language, and the physicians didn't seem too concerned with communication anyway. They were incapable of dealing with the differences in our physiological structure, and indifferent to our suffering. We managed to procure some harmless first-aid supplies and were more or less allowed to treat our own injuries."

"Was their technology vastly different?" Iblen questioned. "Primitive or superior?"

"Yes... both. You see," Kirk paused, then tried to clarify, "... the Anties -- the Anthranians -- had had their technology elevated by the Klingons, but most of it was beyond their own capabilities. None of the advances which had been given to them were ever used to

their maximum potential, at least not in what we witnessed. They had disruptor pistols, and I believe I saw them in use on only two or three occasions. It was the same with the military installation and the infirmary. Michaelson's injuries were extremely grave -- his entire left side had been burned and blasted. We were afraid to use any of the alien drugs. They had given us something when we arrived -- I suppose it was a sedative -- and it gave us all a terrible rash. I guess we were lucky at that; it could have been worse... "

Lattimer's equipment was doing tailspins again. Kirk saw him exchange a look with Iblen. The Admiral sat back as Kirk tried to control his responses. He did not want these men to pity him or pacify him.

"Look -- Anthrania is a world which you cannot conceive. It's brute savagery elevated to space flight, primitives with modern technology. They've managed to combine their own tactics and customs with new advances in psychology and warfare. I'll say one thing for them -- they learn what they want to learn very quickly. Like the Nazis of Earth's twentieth century, they have a total disregard for any life other than their own. What we... experienced..." Kirk faltered, "you could not possibly understand."

Iblen leaned forward, his brow furrowed earnestly. "Then you realize *why* they had to be stopped."

"And were they?" Kirk met his eyes. "Or did we merely delay the confrontation?"

"Without the Klingons, the Anthranians will be unable to effect much damage," Iblen answered. "The alliance was definitely shattered by your arrival. As long as their presence was clandestine, the Klingons were willing to help Anthrania. But when threatened by Federation inquiry, they quickly pulled out, leaving Anthrania holding the bag, so to speak."

Kirk thought about that for a moment. It certainly explained the agitation he had seen among his captors on occasion. They had been betrayed, caught with Federation prisoners and with no clout to retaliate.. "Of course," Kirk mused aloud. "No wonder they were so desperate for a confession from us. Without the Klingons..."

"Exactly," Lattimer concluded. "On the other hand, *we* could not admit to secret surveillance of their planet, and since we had no proof of Klingon involvement, our position was extremely weak."

"All they could do was hold you and try to effect a confession," Iblen picked up. "Which, eventually, they did accomplish."

The words struck Kirk like a blow. He couldn't tell if the Admiral were condemning him or if he were merely expecting to be blamed. Something inside of him recoiled from these men in their nice, clean office, who had gone peacefully to bed with a full stomach every night for the past ten months. Let them think whatever they liked. Let them do whatever they wanted to him.

Lattimer glanced at his computer, where the reaction gauge was bouncing back and forth.

"Admiral," he said softly, "I suggest we've covered enough for today."

Iblen consulted the chronometer. "You're right, Cray. It's almost lunchtime." He addressed Kirk. "I'll expect you here tomorrow, same time, Captain Kirk. Meanwhile, try to get some rest -- and some pleasure. Starbase Three is quite aptly suited for shore leave entertainment and so forth."

Kirk, surprised at the abrupt conclusion, was silent for a moment, watching Lattimer disconnect his terminal. There was a need in him to tell the story, at least on a superficial level, to let these men know how unfairly he and his crew had been treated, yet now he was being made to wait. He frowned. Shore leave entertainment, indeed. He could almost read Iblen's thoughts: *'Go find yourself a pretty woman, Captain. Make love and cast off your tensions.'* Damn, nothing is that simple.

Pensive and depressed, he left Iblen's office and managed to find his way back to the central lobby. As he turned the corner, a tall slim figure stood up and came toward him. Some of the fog lifted a little.

"I thought perhaps we could have lunch at the commissary down the street," Spock suggested,

without explaining his presence. Gratefully, Kirk accepted his casual approach and his welcome companionship.

"Not on the base, Spock. Let's walk over to the port. I think I want a drink."

- 2 -

The next few days brought more of the same, tiresome sessions with Iblen and Lattimer. Every detail of his report was examined, every incident looked at from all directions. Kirk grew more and more alienated from these analytical officers who kept assuring him that they were all on the same side, all after the same things. Kirk felt like the outsider, he was the one who had changed, who had become suspicious and estranged from his peers. *They* had not been where he had been, had not survived what he had survived. They required that he go over every incident, relive days and nights he wanted only to forget. His answers became shorter and more vague as time passed. He was becoming more and more reluctant to talk about the experience, growing even more upset and distant than he had been when he was first returned to the Enterprise. He made clipped, precise statements, telling only what they needed to know, unwilling to elaborate or discuss his own reactions.

On the fourth day, Kirk arrived early for his meeting, tense before it even began. As he waited in Iblen's outer office, he spied a figure walking down the hallway past the door.

"Marty!" Excitement filled Kirk as he rushed out to greet him. Anderson looked startled, then smiled warmly.

"Hello, Captain. I just finished talking with Commodore Salzin. How's it going?"

Kirk relaxed in the pleasure of being with someone who understood, a kindred spirit from hell. "All right, I guess. How have *you* been?"

"I'll be better when this damn red tape is over," Anderson grumbled. "My father and sister are here -- Starfleet arranged it -- they arrived yesterday." He shook his head. "Sure is good to see them again. We're planning a trip to Rigel when I'm finished here, then home for a while, I think."

Kirk smiled at Anderson's enthusiasm. "Good. I'm glad for you, Marty."

"You're not here alone, are you, Jim? We've got an extra room if..."

"No," Kirk cut him off. "I'm not alone."

"Spock." It was a statement. Kirk nodded.

"Captain Kirk?" Iblen's secretary was beckoning to him. Kirk turned back to Anderson, reluctant to end the chance encounter.

"Well, good luck, Marty," he began.

"We're all going to need more than luck, Jim. The brass doesn't know, they can't possibly ... it's not their fault, but... I'm not down for the count yet, Captain. I've made it this far..." His voice trailed off and he suddenly seemed uncomfortable.

Kirk reached out and took his hand, squeezing it firmly in a farewell grasp. "It'll work out for you. Take care, my friend."

"You too, Jim. Be happy."

Kirk watched him leave, aware that Iblen was waiting, knowing what still must be faced, regretting the conclusion of the empathic interlude. Then he turned and entered the office, closing the door firmly behind him.

"Was that Martin Anderson you were just talking with?" Lattimer asked immediately.

"Yes. He was just leaving Commodore Salzin," Kirk responded easily.

Iblen and Lattimer looked distressed. Iblen said, "We're trying to limit contact between your crew right now."

Kirk chilled. "Why?"

"To avoid any... contamination of testimony," Lattimer explained.

"You think we're making this *up*?" Kirk exploded. "Do you think we've perpetrated a hoax on the Federation? All right -- Anthrania never happened. We were treated like royalty, given a grand tour. We've all defected to the Klingon Empire, so you'd better start the trial!"

"Easy, Captain," Iblen soothed. "Try to understand our position. Memory can be erratic. To get a clear overall picture we have to compare eight sets of testimonies, glean the common factors, eliminate the erroneous conclusions, the sentimentalism. It's not easy to play devil's advocate in a situation like this."

Kirk's anger evaporated as quickly as it had flared. He felt a sober regret at the innocence of these men. "You've got it rough, Admiral," he said flatly. "All right, let's get on with the session."

"Why do you resent me?" Iblen asked. "We have all done -- and are doing -- our jobs. This ... Anthranian incident has unsettled us all."

"It's a blow to the pride of Starfleet," Kirk said sarcastically, "an inconceivable blunder."

"We did *not* blunder," Iblen retorted. "Our purpose was accomplished. Anthrania did not attack Preslin. The Klingons retreated. A dangerous situation was averted. Your mission was, essentially, a success, Captain."

"Except that we got a big black mark in the eyes of the galaxy. We were guilty of espionage," Kirk came back.

"Militarily, we were successful," Lattimer qualified, "diplomatically, we were not."

Kirk rubbed a hand over his eyes. To him, it was all the same. A mission was a success only when it was justified. A new, frightening thought occurred.

"Are you saying," he began quietly, "that if we had confessed right at the beginning, as soon as we were captured, that it would have been the same? That our ten months of resistance were unnecessary?"

"Of course not," Iblen snapped. "You were bound to resist. You were compelled to go by the code. For all we know, if you had admitted it in the beginning, the Anthranians may have executed all of you outright. It was within their rights to do so, even after your confession."

"Compromises..." Kirk murmured.

"What?" Lattimer queried.

"Nothing, Commander. Let's proceed." Kirk sighed.

Kirk was noticeably fatigued when he returned from the day's session with the Board of Inquiry. Spock looked at his eyes, underlined with blue-black crescents, at the hands which

trembled faintly on the doorplate, and knew it had been a difficult meeting.

Swiftly he crossed to Kirk's side, standing close, regretting that he had complied with Kirk's request that he wait here at the hotel suite for him.

"Jim...?"

Kirk squinted his eyes, a frown creasing his brow. "I'm all right, Spock. Just... tired."

Spock nodded, knowing how little sleep Kirk had been managing to get the past few nights. The Vulcan straightened and followed Kirk to the couch, checking an impulse to guide his Captain's hesitant footsteps.

"I'll order dinner," Spock suggested. "Is there anything in particular you desire?"

"Coffee... lots of coffee..." Kirk requested, rubbing a hand over his face as he sat down and leaned back.

"Captain, a caffeine beverage will hardly aid your ability to sleep, and since you seem to require rest -- "

A twinkle lit Kirk's eyes. "Right as usual, Mr. Spock." He grimaced. "Order something... light, I suppose. I want to get a shower, get cleaned up -- then we'll eat."

As he rose and headed for the bathroom, Spock frowned. A strange preoccupation of Kirk's which he'd noticed in the past days was his compulsion with cleanliness. He was constantly washing his hands, and he showered and changed his clothing several times a day as if he were trying to wash away the filth of Anthrania. McCoy would no doubt understand the obsession better than he did, but even Spock could perceive the implications.

Spock was curious about the day's session, yet he refrained from mentioning it. After supper they would talk, he knew, and he would be able to obtain some additional information from his reluctant Captain.

Kirk however, was not thinking of the Inquiry as he entered the bathroom and stripped off his soiled uniform.

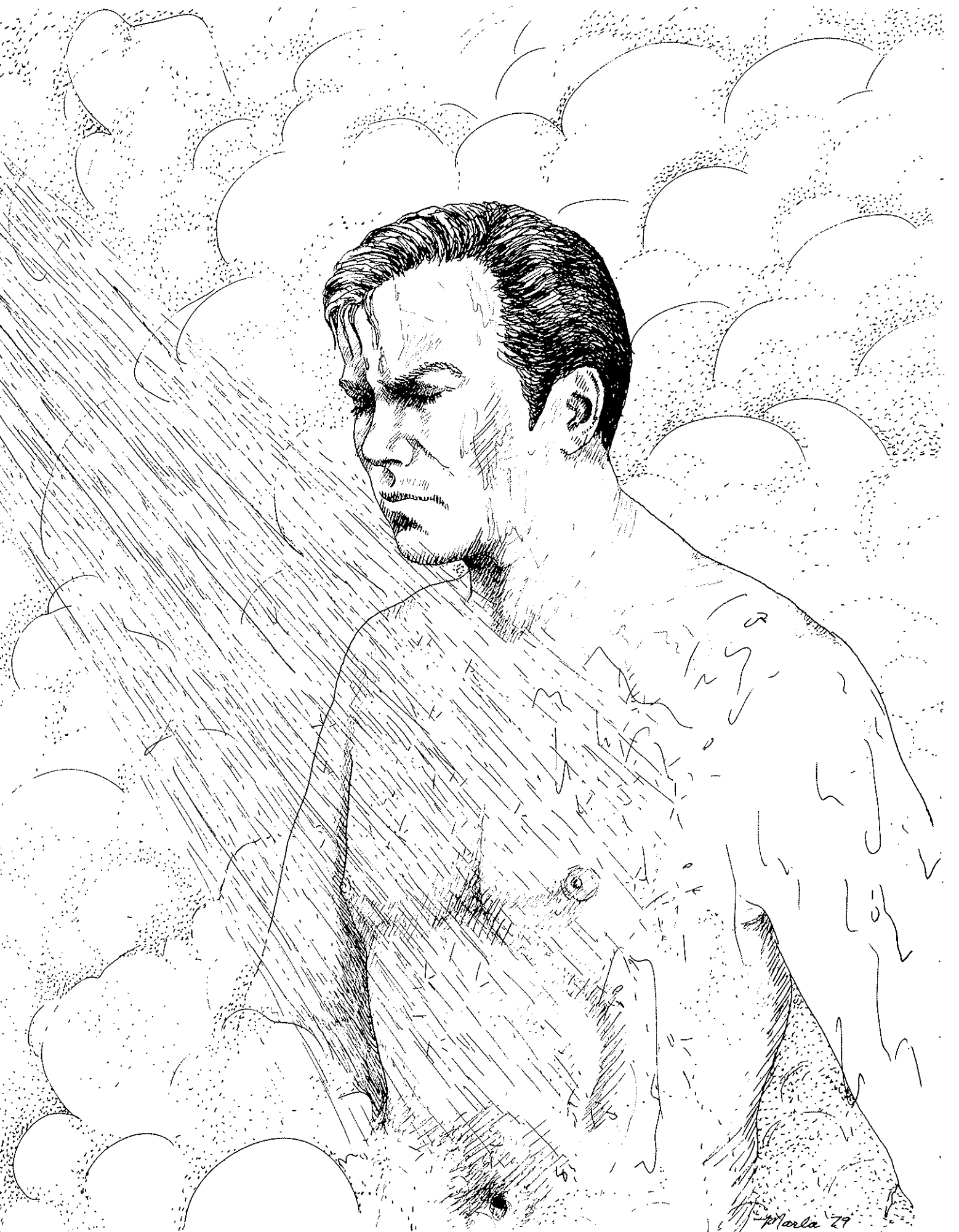
Dirty... so dirty. Stinking, putrifying... have to cleanse... must get... clean...
His thoughts tumbled about in confusion, and he was suddenly in another time and place.

... Kirk knew he was quite a sight. The tattered coverall which barely covered his body was stained with grime, blood and his own wastes. The sores on his legs and arm had opened again and were draining, adding their sticky discharge to the rest of the rotting smells. Anderson stank, too... hell, they ALL did, and it made communication difficult. Nobody wanted to get very close to anybody. Nice way to break any organization, Kirk mused. It had been weeks since they had been given any water for washing, and the scant amount provided for drinking was inadequate for a thorough cleaning, although they did try. How great a luxury would be a thin sliver of real soap...

Shaking himself from the mental image, Kirk stepped into the shower, reaching up to adjust the flow of water. He savored the feel of the water on his skin, letting it cascade over him, tasting it, hearing it. Yet the tug of memory was too strong to be turned off; once again the past intruded. There were times, he remembered, when the Anthranians had insisted on cleaning them, turning even that basic function into a punishment, as if the prisoners themselves were to blame for their filthy condition.

... The guards came in and ordered them to remove their clothing, roughly assisting any who were not quick enough. Kirk tensed as a guard kicked Garcia in the side, but the Captain had learned enough not to make a sudden move. He winced as the cloth stuck to dried sores on his back and shoulders and he felt them begin to bleed as the fabric fell away.

Naked, they were lined up and led to another part of the building, while Anthranians stood



Marla '79

and stared as they were led past. Some pointed and hooted and gabbled derisively in their native tongue as the group trotted by, but Kirk was past caring. It was just one more humiliation.

Then they were in the 'shower room'; hoses were dragged from the stands against the wall. Anthranian 'water' -- a rust tinted orange liquid -- spewed forth violently, knocking Kirk over with its force. It was cold, colder than ice, chilling him, stabbing him with dozens of frozen needles that made him shiver and twitch. The room was small; there was no escaping even if he'd been able to overpower the guards. The freezing water stung his eyes, ripped open newly healed flesh, kept beating at him until his bones ached with cold. Tears squeezed from his eyes, their warmth a welcome relief until they, too, were washed away...

Must get warm... must... Unconsciously, Kirk's hands adjusted the shower temperature.

Spock, still in the living area, suddenly saw steam coming from the direction of the bathroom. He was propelled into action with an urgency he did not fully comprehend. Hearing the rush of water, Spock barely hesitated before he entered. Billows of heated air filled the bathroom.

"Jim?"

There was no answer, so Spock slid the door of the shower stall open. Inside, with eyes pressed tightly closed and fists clenched at his sides, Kirk stood under the spray of hot water from the shower.

Spock reached up and slammed the dial to the off position, then tugged at the unyielding shoulders of his Captain. Kirk was tense, coiled, and he seemed to realize only gradually where he was and what was happening.

"Spock... I..." he mumbled, shivering as the colder air met his heated skin.

Spock grabbed a large towel from the nearby rack and wrapped it around Kirk's body. His skin was reddened, scalded by the water, yet still he didn't seem to understand what he had done. There was a frightened, confused look in his eyes, as Spock led him gently from the stall.

"Sit down... easy," the Vulcan commanded, guiding him into the bedroom and onto the bed. Kirk's shivering increased as Spock removed the towel to ascertain how badly the Captain was burned. Although the reddening skin must be painful, Spock let out a sigh of relief that no serious damage had been done.

Kirk endured it silently, as Spock retrieved a can of aerosol medication and sprayed the most badly affected areas.

"What were you trying to do?" Spock chided. "You had the controls too high for -- "

"I don't know," Kirk interposed. "I just wasn't thinking..."

Spock helped him into a velour robe, careful to avoid touching the sensitive skin, but Kirk didn't seem to feel any pain. As Spock reached behind him for the belt, his hands circling Kirk's waist, Kirk slowly sagged against him, trembling in a delayed reaction.

"Oh my God, Spock, what's happening to me? I wasn't paying attention to what I was doing, I was..." his voice choked and Spock drew him close.

"It's over, Jim. You're all right," he soothed.

"I'm so tired that I'm getting careless," Kirk rationalized. "Just lucky for me that you were nearby..."

"Lie down," Spock insisted, pulling down the bedcovers as Kirk slid in. "You are correct. Rest is imperative. Sleep now..."

As Kirk's eyes closed, Spock arranged the covers over him and sat beside him on the bed. It took several minutes for him to still his own internal shivering and approach the incident calmly. For a brief interval, Kirk had obviously lost touch with reality, and that could be dangerous. Spock knew he would have to watch him closely during the next few days, without appearing to hover, for any more signs of disorientation. If it were only fatigue, then rest would cure it, and Spock would make sure he rested. Sighing, he touched the flushed skin of Kirk's cheek, then stood and quietly left the room.

- 3 -

During the next several days, the strain under which Kirk was functioning intensified. Each morning Spock watched as he valiantly donned his dress uniform and set out, grim and determined, for another session at Headquarters. In the afternoon, when Spock met him, Kirk said very little about the proceedings, preferring to concentrate on relieving the tension which the debriefing created.

Spock knew that a shore leave would inevitably follow the debriefing, and he began to anticipate the conclusion of the sessions with an anxious frustration. He felt that Kirk needed time away from the military installation, time to accept and adjust.

One evening, they returned to their hotel a few blocks from Command Headquarters. The session had been a long one and it was nearly dusk before Kirk had emerged from Admiral Iblen's office. Declining Spock's suggestion that they dine out, Kirk had complained of a headache, and decided they would eat at home. As they walked, however, his weariness seemed to disappear and his mood shifted to light, a carefully constructed pose of cheerfulness.

"Go wash up," Kirk suggested when they arrived. "I'll fix dinner." Businesslike, he used the kitchen facilities to wash his own hands.

Spock hesitated, suspicious of the unexpected enthusiasm. "The food processor -- "

"No, no, Spock," Kirk interrupted. "A quick gastronomical delight prepared from... " he opened the cabinet, "... mmn, good. Plenty of chili powder."

"Jim -- "

"Don't worry, I won't use meat. Noodles in cream sauce with lemon juice and... asparagus," he finished, surveying the shelves.

Spock sighed, determined to humor his Captain, although his abrupt mood change gave rise to suspicion. If only Kirk would discuss what was really on his mind, instead of camouflaging it behind a show of jocularity, perhaps Spock could help.

Miraculously, the meal turned out better than the Vulcan had expected. They sat at the table over their empty plates as Kirk's almost frenetic buoyancy continued.

"Now, what did I tell you? It was delicious, right, Spock?"

Spock wiped his lips with his napkin, reflecting that 'delicious' was hardly the adjective he would have chosen, but feeling the time was right for a bit of light teasing, he said, "I found the cuisine extremely... unique. You are a fine starship captain, Jim. However, I am relieved that you were never called upon to program the food selectors." Suddenly Spock realized his error. Kirk's expression turned dark and grim.

"I'm no longer a 'fine starship captain', Spock. And the Enterprise is far away."

"For now," Spock conceded softly. "But the future -- "

" -- Holds only questions, not answers, not promises," Kirk finished, and Spock saw the rigid lines begin to form once again on his Captain's face. Anxious to discover what was behind Kirk's obvious distress, Spock proceeded cautiously.

"Jim, I do not wish to press. I can understand how taxing the sessions with Starfleet must be. But if it would help -- "

Kirk cut him off, rising to gather their dishes with an intense concentration. "Help? Hardly, Spock. It's illogical that I should burden you with my problems. Even you should be able to see that."

"It is also illogical to deny that we need help. You taught me that."

Kirk paused a moment, absorbing the tone of Spock's retort. "Nevertheless, I -- damn!" The dishes which Kirk had been carrying clattered to the floor. He stooped to gather them up and sliced his finger on a sharp knife as he did so. For a moment there was silence as Kirk stood, white faced, trembling faintly, until Spock came toward him. Without speaking, he took the things from Kirk's hands, set them aside and wrapped a towel around the profusely bleeding finger.

"Sit down," he instructed. Kirk looked up at him wonderingly, as if uncertain how the accident had happened. Spock guided him to a chair.

"Let me see how deep that is," he said calmly, uncurling the ball which was Kirk's fist to examine the underside of the index finger. Kirk's hand was so cold, the muscles stiff.

As Spock satisfied himself that it was a superficial cut, some of the color returned to Kirk's face and he spoke with a forced lightness.

"Too bad you can't teach me how to control the bleeding. It would sure come in handy."

Spock pressed a napkin to the cut and sat back, studying Kirk thoughtfully.

"Another step toward being a Vulcan, Captain?"

"What? Spock, I was just -- "

"Yes, exactly. Vulcan gymnastics, Vulcan self-healing, Vulcan *control*... " Spock emphasized the last word. "Jim, you are a human. You cannot change that fact. You cannot adopt principles which do not work for you. You *are not Vulcan*."

Kirk's chin went up. "That's hardly fair. I've never professed a desire to -- "

"Haven't you?" Spock insisted. "At some point, on Anthranian, you decided that to suppress your human emotions would be beneficial. You instructed your crew to be more 'Vulcan'."

"Yes, but that was a necessary adaptation to get through an ordeal which would have been intolerable otherwise. Non-emotional reaction isn't limited to the Vulcan race, you know." Kirk was angry now, hazel eyes snapping.

"Yet somewhere, it seems," Spock went on persistently, "you've confused control with suppression. The two concepts are not the same."

"You weren't there -- you don't know what it took just to get through the day -- how we had to discipline ourselves to survive the beatings and the interrogation... " Kirk broke off, standing up. "I'm too tired to argue with you tonight, Spock," he concluded neutrally. "If you would finish cleaning up in here, I'll take my shower and get to bed."

Spock rose, half tempted to pursue the subject, to try to break through Kirk's defenses, but he checked himself. Kirk had the debriefing to face tomorrow, and Spock would do nothing to weaken his Captain's show of confidence to Starfleet. Now was not the time to force the issue.

"All right, Jim. We'll talk another time." Spock stared after the retreating figure,

pensive. He was operating blindly, trusting on their ever present rapport to guide his logic, but it did not seem to be helping, not on the deeper levels where it mattered. McCoy had cautioned him to go slowly, to allow Kirk to set the pace, advising Spock to try to get Kirk to talk about Anthrania and what his captivity had meant to him. 'Coax him to express his *feelings* Spock,' McCoy had explained. 'Don't force anything, but don't avoid it, either. Let *him* find the way.'

Only, it wasn't happening like that. Kirk *wanted* to avoid the subject, and coaxing had little effect. Spock was filled with a sickening insecurity over what he had committed himself to do. Human emotions and psychology were far out of his line. Yet McCoy had seemed confident, giving Spock advice and the reassurance that he would help, if needed. 'Call me, Spock. If anything goes wrong, if Jim's mental stability deteriorates, if he shows any signs of abnormal behavior, get word to me and I'll come right away.'

Spock rested his head on his folded arms. No, things were not serious enough to call McCoy. Kirk seemed no worse than he had been on the ship. True, he was under more pressure, and it was showing, but Spock knew he had to allow him more time.

Time... so much time had already passed. Almost a year now since that day Kirk had beamed off the Enterprise for a supposed R&R. Then, two weeks later Spock's world had collapsed as he had learned the truth of that so-called shore leave, and for the next ten months the Vulcan had lived with the terrible fear that he would never see his Captain again.

Each day was lived with the anticipation of a message from Starfleet Command, informing him that Captain Kirk had been reported dead -- from attempted escape, retaliation by the Anthranians -- his mind conjured all sorts of possible causes. Each night he needed hours of soothing meditation just to prepare himself for a few hours rest; he refused to resort to McCoy's offer of medication.

At first there had been the uncertain and incomplete information. They heard that two officers had been killed in the capture, but no names were available. Later, when their identity was released, Spock had breathed a little easier, yet still the tightness in his chest did not ease.

During the time when he was injured and confined to Sickbay, he had become convinced that Jim had died and no one had told him, his thoughts becoming confused and disoriented as a result of his injuries. As he gradually grew stronger, he knew somehow that Jim was still alive, for he still felt him alive.

Later, with Harris in command, Spock used his time to pursue the goal of Kirk's release. When necessary he used his rank and influence ruthlessly, becoming a master at diplomatic reasoning. It didn't matter *why* Starfleet had sent a secret crew to Anthrania, or even if they *had*, he argued, the fact was that Anthrania was holding Federation citizens and they *must* be returned.

Spock had been driven by a fear for Jim's life, never thinking beyond the safe return of his Captain. Now, Kirk had come home, he was alive and well and whole -- yet nothing was right. New worries replaced the old, and still Spock was unrealistically afraid that he was losing him. Anxiety still gnawed at his stomach, fear still played on his control. He questioned if things would ever be the same again.

Soft footsteps sounded nearby. Engrossed in his thoughts, they barely registered at first, then the touch of a hand on his shoulder brought the Vulcan back with a start.

"Spock?"

He raised his head guiltily, caught off-guard. Kirk stood beside him, dressed in a robe, his hair still damp from the shower.

"Are you okay, Spock?"

He swallowed, regaining his composure. "Certainly. I was... meditating for a moment."

Kirk slid a chair next to him and sat down, his eyes never leaving the Vulcan's face. "Spock, I wanted to say that I'm sorry for the way I acted earlier. I know you're trying to help, and I appreciate it. You've been so patient, so understanding -- just give me a little

more time, okay?" Kirk's voice was soft, gentle, a confident tone which Spock recognized from long ago. Spock wondered again at the strange empathy between them: what had brought Jim out here at this precise time? It was as if Jim had sensed Spock's despair and was responding to it, conquering his own doubts to reassure the Vulcan. Reinforcing this theory, Kirk leaned over and rested his hand lightly on Spock's arm.

"I sometimes forget that even you have limitations, my friend."

The stiff Vulcan facade melted. Touched and vulnerable, Spock met his Captain's eyes. "Yes. You taught me... to need..."

"I'm here now," Kirk assured. "And -- somehow -- we'll work it out. Together."

Spock nodded silently. What they shared, what he had just experienced, convinced Spock that he was right. Somehow -- they would go home again.

- 4 -

Gradually the Inquiry drew to a close. If any conclusions were drawn, Kirk was not aware of them. He had become so engrossed in telling his story without really saying anything, presenting facts and evidence such as the Board would be interested in without becoming emotionally involved in his testimony and thus failing to resolve for himself what it had all meant, that he was neither relieved nor disappointed when it was concluded.

Kirk had been mildly surprised at some of Iblen's information; it allowed him to piece together what Starfleet and the Federation had been doing during their captivity. The inane diplomatic games which had been played, the constant stalemates and rejected proposals, the fierce arguments and mutual threats -- all had combined to drag the negotiations on for those intolerable months. The name of Commander Spock came frequently into conversations, and Kirk began to see how the Vulcan's determination had accomplished so much to clear the path for their release.

Yet it all still made no point, and when all the information had been presented and the debriefing was over, Kirk felt only apathy and a now vague expectancy. Patiently, Iblen explained to him that he would be granted a three month leave of absence, an opportunity to rest and recuperate from the strains to which he had been subjected. On a specified date at his leave's termination, he was to report back to Starbase Headquarters. At that time he would undergo physical and psychological testing which would enable Starfleet to determine his career potential and plans. In other words, Kirk concluded, they would decide whether or not he was fit for command -- of the Enterprise, or anything else.

It seemed fair to Kirk. At a time when he wasn't even sure what he was going to do the next day, his future was as cloudy as a winter sky. Perhaps in three months he would be able to decide where he wanted to go, what he wanted to do. Perhaps his sought-after love of and loyalty to the Enterprise would return, and he would be capable of fighting for her. Right now it didn't matter, much as Kirk wanted it to.

During the last several days of the debriefing sessions, Spock had informed Kirk that he had some errands that needed his attention and had taken off, rather secretively, intent upon pursuing them. At the close of the final day's interviews, he met Kirk outside the Headquarters building with a surface car. Kirk couldn't suppress a bemused expression at the vehicle.

"What's this?"

"It is a surface car, Jim." Spock's tone was teasing. Kirk frowned.

"I know *what* it is; what I mean is, where did you get it?"

"I rented it. Get in, please." Kirk hesitated a moment, then decided to go along with the Vulcan. He climbed inside, took a passenger's seat, while Spock arranged himself in the navigator's position and keyed a destination into the computer drive. The doors slid shut and they took off at a leisurely speed.

"Where are we going?"

"You'll see."

It really didn't matter to Kirk where they were heading, but he was amused at his friend's attitude. He leaned back in the seat, relaxing, letting the fatigue of the debriefings slip away, grateful they were over and anxious for the extended leave time he'd been granted.

Before long, they were leaving the military establishment and the surrounding city behind, heading toward the country. Then the vegetation began to thin out, the land grew flatter on one side and jutted with cliffs on the other. Kirk knew they were nearing the planet's one major body of water, the Cardiff Ocean. They passed several sparsely populated areas, rather like beach towns, and finally came to a stop in front of a small cottage facing the water. Puzzled, Kirk followed Spock out of the car, as the Vulcan began unloading luggage and boxes from the storage compartment.

"Our home for the duration of our leave," Spock announced, obviously pleased with himself and anticipating Kirk's reaction. The Captain didn't disappoint him. He grinned, delighted with the surprise.

Spock had spent the last few days finding just the right place where Kirk could begin to unwind from the agony of the past year. The beach house was secluded enough to afford the quiet and privacy Kirk would appreciate, yet not so far from populated areas to be inconvenient.

A small entryway opened into a large living-dining area. The front wall was completely transparent, facing the ocean and the silver white beach. Off the main room was a modern kitchen, equipped with a food processor and a more conventional range should they desire to do their own cooking. On the other side of the house, a short hall led to two adequate sized bedrooms, each with a large shell-shaped bed in the center and private bathrooms. One more smaller room completed that area of the house. The smaller room was a den and library, with shelves of microfilm books and viewers, the old style paper books that both Kirk and Spock enjoyed, a desk, and a comfortable padded sofa.

Kirk followed Spock on a tour of the house, making appropriate comments on various features as the Vulcan pointed them out. When they were finished, they returned to the main room.

"I shall bring in the rest of our supplies," Spock said, giving Kirk a long look. The Captain had grown increasingly quiet as they looked through the house. Spock had credited it to fatigue, but now he wasn't so sure. "Is the house satisfactory?" he asked.

The comfort and home-like atmosphere of the cottage, and Spock's thoughtfulness and concern, touched Kirk and his eyes brimmed with the tears of sadness he hadn't let himself admit until now. *All this luxury... all this... love, after so many months of nothing but pain and agony, each day a struggle to survive...*

"It's... perfect, Spock," he managed. "It's just..." he hung his head. "I'm sorry."

Spock came beside him then, placing his hands on the slumped shoulders.

"It will take time, Jim," he whispered, "but here you will have a chance to put it behind you, to learn to... forget."

Kirk looked up into the understanding eyes. How easy it would be to ask Spock... to have the Vulcan touch his mind, erase the memories... forget. It would be an invasion of his friend's moral code to ask him to use his race's mental techniques, but Kirk knew Spock would do it for him... if he asked. Yet Kirk rebelled against taking the easy way out. It would be cutting away a part of his life, losing a portion of himself. That was not the way. It had happened, and he would have to learn to live with it. He smiled thinly, reaching up to brush at his eyes.

"You're right, Spock. Now let me help you with the unloading."

Spock dropped his hands, sighing. "It's not that much. I can manage. Why don't you rest?"

"I have plenty of time to rest. I'm not all that tired now." Kirk's gaze lingered on his friend. The Vulcan shrugged.

"Well, after we're unloaded, perhaps you'd like a swim before dinner."

Kirk nodded. "Sounds good." He hesitated. "Spock... thank you."

They unloaded the car, then changed. Kirk found that Spock had packed his clothes and apparently purchased some new things -- civilian apparel and leisure clothes in a style that Kirk had always liked to wear off-duty. They swam in the cool ocean until they were both tired and later, when Spock programmed the food selector for their meal, Kirk found that he was pleasantly hungry. After dinner they sat in the living area, just talking until the last of the daylight slipped away and the room grew dark. Spock rose from his chair.

"I was not certain what time the sun would set in this area, so I haven't keyed in the automatic light timer. I will do it now."

"Not just yet, Spock." Kirk rose and walked to the window wall. "This is a beautiful view -- the inside light would dull it."

Spock came up behind Kirk, looking out. The horizon was not visible, the blackness of the sea merged with the blackness of the sky. Their gazes traveled upward where strange constellations and thousands of tiny twinkling lights pinpointed the midnight heavens. They stood that way for a long while, each lost in their own thoughts. After a while, they turned the lights on, filled the idle evening with talk and a half-hearted game of chess. At last Kirk decided he was tired enough to try sleeping, at least he would go to bed. He knew Spock would not retire until he did.

Kirk lay for a long time giving into the luxury of the 'just-right' mattress. He had opened the window, preferring the fresh salt-air breeze to the artificial coolness of the air conditioning. How sweet become the simple things of life when they are denied. How dependent mere humans are on creature comforts. Spock would not have been so affected by the loss of personal conveniences as he had been. Vulcan disciplines would have enabled him to have withstood all the inadequacies of the Anthranian prison. Kirk knew that the atrocious living conditions they had been forced to endure had contributed to their ever decreasing morale. Spock would have coped better.

Yet his Vulcan friend had understood and with that ever uncanny perception had provided for his every need -- the cottage carefully selected with an insight to Kirk's tastes, the clothes chosen for his comfort, every act thoughtfully geared toward Kirk's best interest and pleasure. He marveled lovingly, sleepily, at his friend's devotion.

All those long months on Anthrania, one face had remained clear to him, throughout the torture, times when reality no longer had any meaning, one person had been with him. Spock. At times, Kirk had believed he would never see him again, at other times the determination to return to the Vulcan had been all that kept him going. Kirk had known that somewhere, somehow, Spock would find him, negotiate his return. He had counted on it, depended on it. He remembered Spock risking a war with the Tholians, defying Starfleet to look for him on Gideon... The certainty of Spock had remained, even though at times he wasn't sure of himself. Spock was constant, but Kirk himself was doubting, changing. At times rational thinking had been impossible. Tortured beyond the limit of his endurance, Kirk had wondered if he would be whole enough to return to Spock. Yet somehow he had come back, and Spock had been there -- receptive, giving, supporting -- as he had always known he would be.

At last Kirk fell into a restless sleep. Barriers down, the floodgates of memory opened once more.

... Tired... no, he had passed the point of being tired. Forced to stay awake for so long, Kirk felt his mind dissolving, rationality spiraling away like grains of sand in an hourglass. Sand... where did that sand on the table in front of him come from?

No... not sand. Only dust. Dust that danced in the glare of the light above him. Danced ... he could hear the music, melodic strains of an unknown work by Brahms... a harpsichord, expertly played by his musically inclined First Officer. Beautiful, haunting tune, lulling him, soothing...

Heavy eyelids drooped; Kirk was instantly snapped back with a vicious kick to his already bruised and swollen legs. A moan escaped, more from resignation than pain.

He had been confined to this room, forced to sit at this table and answer questions, for six days. The guards, a new one every few hours, would not allow him to sleep. When Ghi wasn't there demanding answers, he was made to sit still, or to walk in endless circles with his hands on top of his head. Food was brought in, tasteless, colorless, pasty pudding which never satisfied the ache in his belly, his constant hunger a touchpoint with reality.

"Up." The guard's strident command filled Kirk with dread. He couldn't make it, knew he couldn't force his feet to obey.

The guard cuffed his shoulder, then poked at his spine with a stick. "Up," he repeated, his English vocabulary exhausted.

Using the table to support himself, Kirk managed to stand, his legs trembling in protest. Very slowly, he raised his arms, crossing his palms on his head. His balance was off; he could feel himself canting to one side.

"Damn you... I can't!" he swore, sinking back down to the chair. "Leave me alone..."

The guard seemed to hesitate and Kirk managed to enjoy the small moment of victory his resistance had won. What WOULD they do if he refused? Beat him? Being unconscious seemed as appealing as sleep right now.

Kirk's eyes rested vacantly on the Anthranian's deep blue tunic. Too dark... a very unbecoming shade of blue... Colors, images blurred and faded, while tiny pinpricks of light dotted his vision. Someone was pushing at him, forcing him to stand, to walk; fingers squeezed painfully into his arms.

He allowed himself to be dragged around the table before his feet finally began working and he felt the hands release their hold on him.

One foot... other foot... one step... two steps... The lights were still twinkling.

"Star light, star bright, first star I see..." Three steps... four steps... "... wish I may, wish I might..."

Kirk crumpled on the last word, the hard floor jarring his knees, scraping his palms. But the floor was moving; he could feel it undulating beneath him, flowing, carrying him away...

A form stooped beside him, long thin fingers reached out to him. Kirk looked up, followed the hand which disappeared into the soft blue nap of velour, past the double row of gold braid, up the arm, over the slightly curved shoulder... to the face, to that beautiful, wonderful, welcomed, familiar countenance. Never had his whole being ached with such sweet, blessed relief as that which flooded through him. Every nerve ending in his body responded to that vision, as his eyes traced the curved upswept brows, the deep eyes filled with concern and caring, the sharp straight nose, the gentle expressive mouth...

"Spock... how..." His own voice sounded unnatural, grating, and Kirk paused, his mind jackknifing in sudden terror and unreasonable dread. Self-loathing filled him, breaking the crest of euphoria with a sickening jolt.

No... Spock must not be here, must not see him like this, could not be a part of this...

"Don't look at me... Don't... Go away." Kirk huddled away from the shimmering image, crawling crablike along the floor to put distance between them. He hugged himself into a ball, burying his head between his arms, blocking all sight.

He felt someone tugging at him, forcing him to lift his face. A voice, calling his name...

"Kirk -- Kirk!"

"... No, Spock... I can't..." A sudden, sharp slap on his cheek cleared his disintegrating sanity. He opened his eyes, still half expecting to see the Vulcan, prepared to run, to hide, to escape the painful encounter, to forestall the embarrassment -- and discovered not Spock, but Ghi, stooped beside him, demanding his attention.

"Why were you sent to Anthrania, Kirk?"

There was an answer -- somewhere, Kirk knew, there was an answer, but his dulled brain wouldn't supply it. He stared at Ghi mutely, wondering what he had done with Spock.

"The Federation sent you here to spy on us, didn't they?"

The words garbled and Kirk couldn't figure out what the question was. Ignore him... just ignore him and maybe he'll go away... maybe he'll just...

Deliberately, Kirk drew his attention away, trying to recapture the earlier vision, his eyes probing the corners of the room for another glimpse of that familiar face.

Ghi stood and spoke to the guard in Anthranian. "It's no use. He's worthless now. Send him back to his room -- let him sleep it off."

Kirk, unaware that Ghi had moved, drew his knees up to his chest and wrapped his arms around his legs.

"Spock..." he whispered. "Spock?"...

"Captain? Jim..."

The throes of the nightmare still with him, Kirk tried to move away from the softly coaxing voice. He shielded his eyes with his arm and moaned. Something was restraining his legs, making escape impossible.

"No, Spock... don't be here... don't..."

"Jim!" The deep, anxious voice held a timbre of reality this time and Kirk opened his eyes, blinking in confusion. He was curled in a ball on the floor beside his bed, and he realized that it was the blanket twisted tightly around him which had prevented movement. Spock crouched at his side, one hand tentatively outstretched, as if wary of contact. Aghast, Kirk realized he must have been re-enacting his hallucination and that Spock had witnessed it. Embarrassment flooded Kirk as he struggled to sit up unaided.

"I'm... sorry, Spock. I..."

The Vulcan reacted quickly, pulling aside the confining blanket, taking Kirk's elbow to assist him. Kirk found he could not meet his friend's intense gaze.

"I'm all right now, Spock," he protested, drawing away and managing to stand. His knees felt weak, but he held himself straight with tight control. Spock rose also.

"You were... frightened," Spock murmured, and Kirk could feel the pain in the words, as though Spock knew what had caused that fear.

"No. It was only a nightmare." Unable to control the weariness, Kirk sank to the bed.

"Can you sleep now, or would you rather talk for awhile?" Spock offered. Kirk knew the Vulcan still desired an explanation, but he had no strength left to give him one.

"I'd rather sleep, if you don't mind," Kirk answered firmly, although he knew his deliberate rejection would puzzle and hurt Spock. He regretted his choice, but the humiliation was too great to be prolonged.

"As you wish." There was a tense formality in Spock's tone. Intentionally, Kirk pressed his eyes shut and listened as the soft padding of Spock's footsteps faded away. Sorrowfully, he recalled the Vulcan's easy, almost teasing banter earlier that day, now starkly contrasted with the confused and sober pain in his friend's voice. Kirk looked up to stare at the ceiling

in the dark with dry, unseeing eyes.

I must have looked like a fool... crawling on the floor, trying to get away from him... I wonder what I actually said, anyway?... Oh, Spock, I don't want to hurt you, I just want it to be like it was... but it can't be, can it?

Troubled, yet weary, Kirk slept. This time there were no more dreams.

- 5 -

The Cardiff Ocean area of Banoc-160 lived up to its reputation as one of the most pleasing spots on the planet. The weather was versatile enough not to be boring; stretches of warm, sunny days, evenings cooled by gentle ocean breezes, were offset by sudden, violent rainstorms or an occasional all day rain, welcomed for just relaxing indoors.

Kirk and Spock enjoyed the variety, finding special interests to keep them busy and occupied. During quiet times Spock began working at collecting and cataloguing various forms of sea life, and Kirk reveled in the assortment of books and tapes available in the den, but most of the days they spent swimming or exploring the nearby cliffs.

To the outward observer, Kirk appeared confident, relaxed, a man enjoying a long awaited vacation. To Spock's more analytical eye, however, little slips, moments of hesitation, tiny insecurities were evident in Kirk's behavior, and the vague feeling of uneasiness continued to plague the Vulcan.

For one thing, there was a flaw in Kirk's usually infallible memory. He often forgot where he put things, or forgot something he had intended to do. He wouldn't remember to carry his towel to the beach, program the computer for lunch, why he had gotten up from the desk and walked into the living area, or that Spock had already told him four times that they were having Kruffle pie for dinner. The incidents in themselves were insignificant, yet combined, the implication was not encouraging.

Another morsel of worry that claimed Spock was that the naturally agile Captain seemed increasingly clumsy, often stumbling when he walked, dropping things, bumping into doorways and furniture. The testing back on board the Enterprise had shown no indication of any neurological disorder and Spock knew that McCoy would have double-checked everything, so the problem could not be physical.

Yet in spite of the daily stimulus the conducive atmosphere and the environment provided, Spock knew that Kirk was still having difficulty sleeping at night, and was often aware that the Captain paced his bedroom or tossed restlessly from recurrent nightmares. Despite silent intentions, Spock found that he could not keep an eye on him all the time.

Kirk paced the room and checked the chronometer for the fifth time in ten minutes. The dial had barely moved, counting off the past four hours with agonizing slowness. *It's impossible for anything to move so slow and still be working. Maybe I ought to have it looked at.* Yet Kirk knew the computer was correct. It was his own exhausted metabolism that was out of synch. He'd spent another sleepless night, tortured by insistent memories that invaded his mind in spite of his efforts to suppress them, and the time dragged from midnight to dawn. At least Spock was asleep; Kirk knew his friend had not been resting well at night, either. Often he would hear movement in the room next to his and occasionally when Spock looked in on

him, Kirk would pretend to be asleep. The Captain knew the cause of Spock's sleeplessness was concern over him, but he couldn't stop the Vulcan's worrying. Tonight, however, it had been quiet in the other room for the past two hours and when Kirk checked, he had been grateful to find Spock asleep at last.

Kirk tried to lie down, found that unsatisfactory and after a few moments, he rose and crossed to the window. A storm was rising. Sharp flashes of lightning split the blackened sky, followed by distant thunder, moving closer with each clap. The wind was increasing, too, and Kirk stood watching, fascinated. Soon it would begin to rain, a heavy, torrential downpour by the approaching signs.

The room felt stifling hot. Kirk opened the windows to the wildness of the weather and caught his breath as a gust of wind hit him with full force. The storm was coming nearer, lightning stabbing brilliance, thunder ripping the sky with increasing explosions, wind howling, swirling sand, heavy clouds riding across the horizon blocking out stars... A cacophony of sound, light and motion... free... unchained...

... He didn't know how long he had been in the box. Time no longer held any meaning. It could have been several days, for he drifted in and out of consciousness. Sometimes when he woke it was light, sometimes dark. Sometimes there were voices, sounds, other times, absolute quiet.

The box was about three cubic feet, made of a heavy metal. In the door there was a small opening large enough for him to see through; the rest was solid. The box stood in the middle of the main yard of the compound...

Damon was dying, Kirk knew. A wound in his gut had festered and was oozing a vile greenness. All night he had screamed, moaned and finally lay exhausted and whimpering. At dawn, the guards had come for them for morning formation. They dragged Damon from his bunk, incredibly, somehow, he had managed to stand. Outside, Kirk slipped an arm around his waist, supporting the man with his own meager strength.

Ghi arrived then, ordered the prisoners to stand at attention. His eyes fell on Kirk, holding Damon.

"Stand apart," Ghi ordered.

"He's sick. He can't stand alone," Kirk answered dully, anticipating Ghi's anger. He was not disappointed. The Anthranian's eyes narrowed.

"I will judge if he is sick. Now, stand apart."

Kirk tightened his grip, knowing that if he let go, Damon would fall. Ghi made a motion with his head. Two of the guards moved toward Kirk and Damon. Roughly, they reached to pull Damon from his arms. Kirk heard a painfilled groan escape the other man's lips, then Damon was on the ground, the guards toeing him with their boots, ordering him to stand. The rest was a blur in Kirk's mind. He remembered attacking the guards with a swift movement, swinging aching arms, kicking, pummeling in a desperate, futile protest. He was dimly aware of his other men joining in, fighting back. Within moments, Ghi had spurred the rest of the guards into action. Kirk heard the whine of weapons being fired, then felt the impact of a stun force ripping away his senses.

When he became aware again, he was stripped naked, tied to a post in the courtyard, and Ghi was speaking.

"...and now you will need an example for your disobedience..." Kirk knew he addressed the rest of the prisoners who were assembled behind him under heavy guard. Kirk's eyes caught Ghi for an instant.

"Go to hell," he whispered. Ghi smiled, then nodded soberly to his guards.

The pain from the beating was unrelenting. The whips felt like talons as they cut into his already abused flesh, tearing again and again. His knees gave way and he hung by his wrists. When Ghi gave the signal to stop, he was only dimly aware that the lashing had ceased. Two

Anthranians cut him down and dragged him to the box. He offered no resistance as they squeezed him into the small enclosure and slammed the heavy door with a shuddering thud. At last, he mercifully passed out.

When he woke sometime later, it was dark. He was sitting with his lacerated back against the cold metal, knees drawn up to his chest, head pitched forward. Even in that crouched position his head reached the top of the box. Anything more than the slightest movement was impossible; he could not turn or shift his body, and his mind felt foggy, dulled by pain, coherent thought beyond his capability. Occasionally he would lapse into oblivion again, to be roused by someone shoving a bowlful of inedible mush through the small opening in the door. He had no strength to take it, so most of the time it spilled over him.

When the Anthranian sun was at its zenith, the box became a furnace, the metal burning his skin. At night the temperature dropped and the cold steel against him sent uncontrollable shivers through his body. Gradually the fog in his mind began to clear, making his pain more acute as lucidity returned.

Now, it was dark outside, cold, and occasionally the night seemed to light up with a white brilliance followed by roaring explosions.

War! he thought. The Federation has attacked the planet! He struggled to peer through the opening. He could see no sign of life in his limited view of the yard. He felt an unaccustomed rise of panic. The prison has been deserted and I've been left behind. The Federation is blowing up this place, and I'll die, undiscovered in this insignificant tomb. He pressed his tortured body against the sides of the box as if he thought he could somehow get out, but he couldn't even move.

The flashes of light continued with increasing intensity, accompanied by the simultaneous roar of thundering noise. Suddenly the metal box was pelted by a violent tapping that rang in his ears and jarred his whole being. Straining again to look through the opening, he saw a glistening wetness forming on the dirt packed surface of the yard.

Not war, his reason told him. A storm. He sank back against the sides of the box, both relieved and terrified. He felt claustrophobic, nauseated from not being able to move. The violent downpour continued to assail the small box, the thunder deafening him, the lightning jolting his senses until every nerve screamed ESCAPE...

Kirk felt the perimeters of his room oppressive. Even the open window had not relieved the sensation that the walls seemed to be closing in on him. He was overwhelmed by the need for space, to be outside, to walk, to stretch, to move unrestrained. He knew he would not be able to bear hearing the pelting of the imminent rain against the house. With a hurried check to verify that Spock was still sleeping, Kirk slipped quietly out the door and, with no particular destination in mind, he headed down the path.

When the rain finally began, it woke Spock with a start. He lay for a moment, listening to the din outside. All was quiet in Kirk's room and Spock knew that the Captain usually slept with the window open. It seemed unlikely that the storm would not have awakened Jim in time to close it, but Spock decided he'd better check anyway. Reaching Kirk's doorway, he saw that his hunch had been correct. The window was wide open and rain was pouring in, making a puddle on the floor. As he entered, Spock became aware of something else. The room was empty. He crossed to close the window, then went back out into the hall.

"Jim?" he called, apprehension beginning to grow. The rest of the house was dark, but sometimes Kirk, unable to sleep, would sit for awhile in the living or dining area. A quick search of the tiny cottage increased Spock's worry. Kirk was not in the house. Anxious and puzzled, Spock tried to imagine where Kirk could have gone in the middle of the night, in the middle of a violent thunderstorm.



That Kirk had left without telling him seemed an irrational act, in light of his recent behavior, and indicated something was wrong. He had to go look for him. Without hesitating any longer, Spock went to the closet. He was dismayed to find Jim's raingear next to his own. Wherever the Captain was, he was not dressed to be out in this weather.

Pulling on his own outerwear, he took the other cloak from the hook and headed out into the storm, berating himself for having slept so soundly as to not have heard Kirk leave.

Outside, he was assailed by the downpour and he hunched against the violence of the wind. He had no idea of where to start looking, but something drew him in the direction of the beach. Frantic at the thought of Kirk wandering around somewhere, he tried calling the Captain's name as he walked, but his voice was lost in the noise of the storm.

Nearing the beach, Spock could see the rolling, churning waves of the ocean as though the sea was giving back its own angry answer to the turbulent heavens. The sandy part was packed hard and slick by the rain. Farther down, rocks and boulders jutted menacingly where the water met the cliffs in an unyielding, timeless battle of superiority. There, walking was treacherous even in sunlight and Spock recoiled from the image of what could happen to anyone attempting to maneuver in the rain and dark. He called out Kirk's name again, still unsure of why he felt this was where Kirk had gone. There was no response.

Another flash of lightning illumined the black sky and Spock saw the figure of a man perched on one of the rocks only a few yards away. Unmindful of his own footing, the Vulcan hurried toward him.

"Jim!" His voice cut through the rain.

Kirk looked up at Spock's approach. The Captain was barefoot; his light trousers and shirt were plastered to his skin. Water streamed off his hair and down his face.

"What are you doing here?" Spock shouted over the storm.

Kirk looked bewildered, then seemed to become aware of his surroundings for the first time. "I... I needed to take a walk," he faltered. "I guess I didn't realize it started to rain."

Spock reached out to draw Kirk's raingear around him. "You're soaked," he admonished gently. "Let's get back to the house."

Kirk nodded and Spock pulled him to his feet. The Vulcan held on to his arm as they started back down the beach.

Inside the house, Kirk stood docilely while Spock pulled off his wet clothes and brought a large towel. As the Vulcan began drying him, Kirk reached out.

"I can do it," he said. Spock relinquished the towel and went into the bedroom to get a warm robe. When he returned, Kirk was shivering violently, attempting to dry his hair. Spock helped him into the robe and led him into the kitchen.

"You're cold. I'll fix you something hot to drink."

Kirk sat down at the table, still trembling, and laid his head on his arms. In a few minutes, Spock brought a steaming mug and placed it in front of him.

"Drink this. It will make you feel better." He sat down next to Kirk, turning to watch him. Kirk sipped the potent liquid and as its warmth flowed into him, his shaking diminished.

"Damn, I was cold," he said finally.

Now that Kirk seemed more normal, Spock allowed himself to relax a little, but he was still confused by Kirk's behavior. "Why did you go out in the storm?" he asked. Kirk looked up at the worried dark eyes and chastized himself for causing the Vulcan such anxiety.

"It wasn't raining when I left," he tried to explain. "I... needed to get out of the house. I..." Flashes of lightning, thunder drummed in his head. He pushed them down. "There was a storm... like this ... one time on Anthrania..." It came flooding back; he began to tremble, cold again. "Oh God, Spock... I didn't even realize it was raining. What's wrong with me?"

Pain flashed through the Vulcan. He reached over and drew the tormented human into his arms, shielding him against the suffering with his own body. *What, indeed, was wrong with James Kirk?*

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During the next several days, Kirk sensed a new solicitude and concern in Spock's attitude and it annoyed Kirk that his solitary trek on the storm-tossed beach should have such repercussions. His unemotional Vulcan was suddenly going to great lengths to provide him with company and activities in which Kirk wanted no part. Gone was the pattern they had established at the cottage; Spock no longer pursued his scientific marine cataloguing, nor did he permit Kirk the freedom to indulge in solitary activities. Unreasonably, Kirk began to feel smothered.

One morning, right after breakfast, Spock leaned back and crossed his arms over his chest. "Would you like to go for a ride today? I thought we might take the car and -- "

Kirk leaned forward. "What happened to your work? The marine life experiments -- you haven't touched them for days."

"Hardly an earthshaking or revolutionary line of study, Jim. I began merely as a means of relaxation, a personal amusement," Spock protested.

"It no longer amuses you?"

"I prefer that we spend more time together," Spock replied quickly. "That is, after all, the purpose of this leave."

"Is it?" Kirk's voice took on an edge despite his efforts to keep it neutral. "I was beginning to think you came along as a..." The accusation died on Kirk's lips. Spock looked genuinely puzzled and slightly hurt. His large, brown eyes were fixed curiously on Kirk.

"Jim -- if I've offended you..."

"There's no basis for offense, Spock," Kirk informed him, resenting Spock's poor attempt at evaluating the situation. "As a Vulcan, you should realize that. I am merely trying to point out that I require a certain amount of independence, just as I'm sure you do."

"I... see," Spock said slowly. "What is it you wished to do today -- alone?"

"Perhaps I'll sit and ponder the mysteries of the universe," Kirk answered sarcastically. "Does it matter? This *is* supposed to be my leave."

Abruptly, Spock stood, clearing the table with swift, short movements. Excuse me, then. If you want me, I'll be in the den." He left the room.

Kirk was certain he had hurt Spock with his rejection of the Vulcan's kindness, and the knowledge brought a flush of shame to his face. He continued to sit at the table, torn between whether to apologize or just forget the incident.

It seemed to him that he was always inadvertently inflicting pain and for so long he had been unable to offer the necessary comfort. Somewhere he had lost his ability for compassion, placing his own welfare above that of others. The Anthranians had stripped him of all tenderness, gentleness, forced him to survive as a creature without human emotions.

Shaking, Kirk sat at the table and rested his forehead against the smooth, cool surface.

The agony of memory assaulted him.

... A recently initiated routine had been established, that of splitting the prisoners into two work groups during the daylight hours. Each morning they were all herded out to the courtyard and five of the men went to the east, beyond the gate to the rocky slope where they were forced to clear away scrub brush and make piles of the loose rock and shale. The other four men were marched to the west, to the flat, arid desert and ordered to dig, tunneling for water sources through the hard packed sand and stone. Kirk, with the latter group, at first saw this as a possible escape opportunity, but after the first week he was reluctantly forced to admit that there was no chance for such a plan to succeed. They were too heavily guarded, too exposed in the open area, too brutally and thoroughly exhausted by the forced labor. During the approximate fourteen hours of daylight, they were given two fifteen minute rest periods which were used to hastily consume dry rations and a small cup of water.

The strain began telling on the men. Already sick, injured and weak from nearly seven months of captivity, none of them were in the condition necessary to endure prolonged physical exertions. When the Anthranians had begun the work program there had been a renewed interest, a common hope for escape, but that had quickly deteriorated into apathy, and from there into a tense resentment, a further mental rebellion against their captors. Kirk tried to maintain a certain perspective, despite his own flagging spirits, tried to keep the men buoyed and even, but it seemed at times like a hopeless crusade. Despite his efforts, arguments and fights began to break out among the group over the smallest and most trivial details. Langenberg accused Pressman of swapping pallets because his own was softer; Garcia attacked Landers over a snipet of cloth which Garcia was saving to tie on his feet the next day; Wyman told Monroe that he 'stank' -- as if any of them could cast the first stone on that issue.

Kirk usually managed to settle things, pacify or bully the individuals involved, but the total situation was becoming unmanageable. Returning to the cell each night, his muscles aching, his sore leg throbbing, his stomach screaming for food, tired beyond the limit of endurance, Kirk could hardly face the problems of a group who had reached their breaking point. They could understand what was happening to them, but they were helpless to stop it.

Even Marty Anderson, on whom Kirk had come to rely for support, was no help. Anderson took the longest to pull out of the apathetic stage, coming back each night to collapse into the escape of stupor. When, finally, his awareness resurfaced, there was a bitter, almost fanatical gleam in his eyes, a coiled tenseness which further worried Kirk. Anderson did not bother with the others, and brushed aside Kirk's attempts to draw him out, so he was still another problem with which Kirk had to contend.

During the third week of the work program, the fuse which had been lit exploded. Kirk's group had been returned to the cell first and the Captain was taking advantage of the few moments of relative peace to relax on his pallet and practice the new technique he was trying to perfect. It was another lesson from the Vulcans, although many races including his own had such exercises. By slowing the breathing, one tried to advance to a high plane of meditation, which freed one from the earthly body and allowed a total relaxation. It was nearly impossible to accomplish, though, when pain was everywhere and dozens of random thoughts broke in to disturb a peaceful concentration.

Dimly he heard the other group returning, heard their footsteps coming down the hall, one guard shrilling, "Emprey, emprey," which meant, 'hurry, hurry.' Sighing, Kirk sat up and rubbed a dirty hand over an even dirtier face and prepared to deal with another evening. It would be four hours until the lights went out. He groaned.

The cell door slid open and a sudden warning bell sounded in Kirk's mind, an intuitive flash that something was wrong. The four men -- four? -- who shuffled in wore pasty, horror-stricken expressions of fear beneath their exhausted appearance. As soon as the guards departed, they rushed toward him. Victor Garcia spoke first.

"Captain, they've got Marty!"

"He struck a guard with his shovel," Wyman explained. "He just went... crazy, Captain. It took three of them to drag him off."

The cold knot of anguish cut into Kirk's chest and he took a deep breath, filling lungs that had suddenly emptied. "When?"

"About two hours ago," Garcia answered, his voice trembling. "And we just stood there, Captain. We didn't... " he looked uneasily at the others, "... none of us tried to help him or to... "

"There was nothing you could have done," Kirk responded automatically. Agitated, he crossed to the door of the cell, his left leg dragging almost uselessly.

Kirk called for the guard, using the Anthranian word for help. The alien lumbered forward and Kirk managed to communicate that he needed to talk with Ghi. The guard gave an Anthranian imitation of a sneer and shook his head.

"Ghi falla." The huge guard plodded back down the hall as Kirk ran the word through his mind for a translation.

"Falla?"

"Means... busy, I think," Langenberg said quietly, painfully, as they all realized just how Ghi may be 'busy.'

Damn, Kirk thought bitterly. If I could only get to Ghi, maybe I could convince him to go easy on the punishment, explain the event away somehow...

He turned back to the seven expectant faces, looking to him for an answer, a solution or a miracle.

"They'll kill him," Garcia said softly, staring at the floor.

Landers, standing beside Garcia, reached over and put his hand on Garcia's shoulder. "Maybe not, Vic. They're unpredictable."

"And maybe it would be better if they did," Wyman added sadly.

The men fell silent, sick with fear and worry. Kirk could not help but notice how they huddled, how they now joined forces against their common enemy, internal squabbles forgotten.

I should have recognized the danger signs. Marty was primed for a fight. If I had taken more time to talk with him, get it out in the open...

"Dave, how much damage did Marty inflict before they took him?" Kirk asked aloud.

Wyman shrugged. "Marty attacked the Bull -- " he referred to a huge, barrel-shaped guard by the name they had given him. "The first blow didn't even make him flinch. The second made him stagger, and by then they were all over Marty with their clubs."

"What made him do it?" Bill Pressman wondered, shaking his head.

"The Bull provoked it," Carl Monroe defended. "He kicked Marty in the back for moving too slow."

"All right," Kirk interceded. "Harvey is right -- the Anties are unpredictable. There's nothing we can do. I'll... I'll keep trying to get in contact with Ghi -- he's our only hope of reasoning with them and -- "

As he spoke, Kirk heard a squad of guards approaching. In a brief instant of *deja vu*, he saw the mutilated body of Arne Lomax hanging from the ceiling, felt his stomach twist as his mind superimposed Anderson's face. Lomax had also fought with a guard. God, no, not again!

The guards trained their weapons on the cell and the door was slid open. "Come," one commanded in Standard.

They glanced at each other uneasily and Kirk led the way as they filed down the hall. Incongruously, Kirk reflected that they had been given no dinner, then felt ashamed at the selfish thought.

'You're nothing but a pack of animals,' Ghi had told him several days before. 'You'd fight each other over a dry piece of bone.'

No... no, we're not. We're a civilized group of men who have been forced to live as animals, Kirk answered in his mind. We're becoming savages because we're being treated as savages.

They were taken outside into the compound. The sight was bizarre and somewhat fearsome at night. Guards with torches formed a large circle and the flames cast eerie shadows over everything. The air was heavy and chill, a still cold that permeated to the bone. As they approached, the circle broke for them to pass, and their escort shoved them forward. In the center stood Ghi, the Bull, and three other high-ranking officials. At first, Kirk did not see Anderson, then his eyes adjusted to the strong light and he spied him off to one side, a huddled, naked heap on the ground. Ghi spoke.

"Some of you witnessed a terrible thing today. This one likes to hit, to fight." As if on command, although none was given, one of the guards yanked Anderson to his feet, holding him up with an arm around his throat.

"Is this what you call a... hero?" Ghi scoffed, strolling with a controlled casualness toward the helpless Commander.

Kirk checked an impulse to rush forward and tried to calm his already frayed nerves. Ghi was becoming too smart, learning how to do psychological damage to his Federation prisoners. He must have known this incident would unify them, and so he attempted to degrade and defile Anderson in front of them. Damn him!

"How brave are you now, Commander? Do you still want to fight?" Ghi asked, smiling at Anderson.

Kirk wondered what they had done to Marty. His face was swollen and there was evidence of a severe beating, and something more as well. Kirk suspected from his appearance that he had been drugged.

Ghi turned back to the prisoners, his voice strident. "You animals are all guilty. You all want to fight. You all want to hit -- you 'men of peace.' So -- " he now wore a look of satisfaction. Ghi was certainly pleased with himself about something, Kirk decided, a cold dread settling over him. "So -- we will let you hit, let you hurt," Ghi finished in triumph. He turned back to Anderson. "Pick someone, Commander -- one of these 'peaceful' animals. We're going to give you an opportunity to fight, since you enjoy the sport."

Anderson's eyes remained blank. Kirk knew that he couldn't have understood Ghi's proposal. A thin trickle of blood leaked from one corner of his mouth and he tried to hunch his arms around his body for warmth.

"Ghi -- " Kirk spoke up suddenly, unaware that he was going to speak until he did so. "The Commander was provoked this afternoon. He was -- "

"Quiet!" Ghi roared, all pleasantry gone from his manner. "I gave no one permission to speak."

Somehow Kirk's voice had drawn Marty's attention. Rousing, he seemed to be aware of the other prisoners for the first time.

"Jim...?"

Ghi's head bobbed up and down. "So it shall be, then. The Commander has chosen his opponent. An excellent choice."

Kirk tried to pull away as the guards seized his arms. He was outraged and bewildered and curiously surprised at his own reaction. Life in the camp had made him resigned to anything, he had thought.

The guards shoved him toward Anderson. Up close, he could see the desperate, stunned look on the man's face, the confusion and disorientation. He had seen such a look only once before in his life.

'... T'Pau, I plead with thee. I... beg...' Suddenly that long-ago day with all its horror came floating back to him. As painful as the memory was, the visions it conjured were tame

compared to current reality. Bones had been on hand then, saving the day with a little human trickery. Spock had recovered from his madness, and things had returned to normal.

Normal. What a word that was. Nothing here was normal. Nothing would be normal tomorrow or the next day or the next. The crazed, tortured man that he was about to fight was not Spock, it was Marty Anderson, and Bones and Spock were... far away. Dimly, Kirk was aware that Ghi was speaking quietly to them.

"The guards will see to it that you fight, Captain -- both of you. We will not disappoint your men."

Kirk and the trembling Anderson were led to the center of the circle and the guards moved back. Angrily, Kirk turned to face Ghi.

"We won't play your games! We're not -- " His speech was terminated by a sharp jab to his neck. He crumpled and tasted the dust, his ears ringing. The Bull stepped up to Anderson menacingly. Ghi's voice echoed in Kirk's head.

"Fight him, Commander -- or Delos shall take you inside again."

Kirk pulled himself to his feet. He could see that Anderson had reached his limit. One more session with the Bull and he'd go over the edge of sanity. Shakily, Kirk hurled himself at Marty, fists pounding without real force. Better this way, he realized grimly. Better for Marty...

With an unintelligible growl, Anderson responded to the attack, coming at Kirk with erratic frenzy. At first Kirk managed to block the blows and roll away to safety, but Anderson persisted, his rasping breath and glazed eyes like that of a madman.

A fist slammed above Kirk's eyebrow, sending a spurt of blood to cloud his vision. All at once, Kirk found himself responding, striking back with a desperate fury. Compassion fled. He was sick of being beaten, clubbed, hurt. He had lived with pain for too long. This was his chance to retaliate, to answer the violence with violence.

The two men rolled on the ground, grappling for supremacy without thought of purpose or will. Anderson seemed to have the strength of ten but no coordination. Kirk, although weak, fought with cold precision and deadly anger. Nothing existed outside the focus of the ring. It was soon apparent that Anderson was faltering, failing to return the blows. Kirk seized his advantage, pressing forward, delivering blows past the point of securing victory. He was attacking, beating, and taking a deadly, senseless satisfaction from the act of aggression.

At last Anderson managed to hurl himself away from Kirk, rolling to a point of safety. He crouched, clutching at his belly, sick and spent and frightened as the drug he had been given wore off.

Kirk froze, his own hysteria evaporating, shocked at his own behavior, betrayed by his own responses, realizing the performance he had staged for the Anthranians and for his own crew. He tried to stand, found his leg wouldn't support him and he collapsed back in the dirt, hearing the whimpers of his opponent and nothing more.

Slowly he moved toward Anderson, dragging his battered body across the space which separated them. Choking, sobbing, Anderson turned toward him, still disoriented and uncontrolled.

"Jim... my god, I wasn't..."

"It's over now," Kirk responded, wanting to reach for him but unable to conquer his own revulsion. He hoped he was speaking the truth; he stole a look at Ghi. The Anthranian appeared totally impassive, watching the scene with clinical detachment.

Abruptly the guards herded the other prisoners away. Kirk saw them begin to protest, saw their looks of concern and apprehension and then they were gone, surrounded by guards.

More guards jerked Anderson and Kirk to their feet. They were returned to the compound, but not to their comrades. They were shoved into a small dark box, similar to the Isolation Cell. When the door had been slammed shut, no light filtered through, and the only sound Kirk

could hear was his own heart hammering noisily in his chest.

Appalled, Kirk shrank back against the wall, as far from the semi-conscious Anderson as possible. What am I becoming? What are they doing to me? Even now, Kirk could feel no compassion for the injured friend; remorse and guilt made him shy away from Marty. I can't even reach out to him -- can't cope with it. He's my friend, but I blamed him, hated him for thrusting us into that situation. I could have killed him back there... God, for a while, I wanted to... They were right. I gave them exactly what they wanted. Good show, Captain.

Anderson moaned and tried to sit up. Kirk could see his shape dimly in the gloom, now that his eyes were adjusting to the dark.

"Jim...?"

Kirk still didn't answer, didn't move, shrugging deeper into the shadows. Perhaps Marty would think he had passed out. Just leave me alone...

Anderson sank back down, retching with the after-effects of the alien drug. Hesitantly, Kirk approached him.

"Can I... do anything?" he offered. Anderson shuddered, his back to Kirk. Kirk rushed on. "Try to control the pain. It's the only way."

There was no warmth in his voice; it was cold and dispassionate. It was all he could manage. When Anderson quieted, he moved slowly back to his corner, huddling in his private misery...

Kirk shuddered as the scene dissolved. *Apologize or forget it* -- the words thrummed in his mind. Past and present merged, blended, then gradually sifted into separate entities again. Today's reality was not Marty Anderson, it was Spock, and he was not on Anthrania, but here on Banoc-160, in the place which Spock had so carefully selected.

This morning he had been thoughtlessly insensitive and cruel to that person whom he least wished to hurt. Yet he hardly knew how to make amends. How was he supposed to apologize when there had been no 'argument'?

He stood and slowly walked to the den. He found Spock at the desk, writing something on ledger sheets. Quietly, Kirk took a chair a few feet away. The Vulcan glanced up once, then resumed his work. They sat that way for a while, silently. Finally Kirk spoke.

"What are you doing?" he asked with a forced casualness.

Spock continued to write. "It is a series of abstract mathematical formulae for a report I am preparing."

"Oh." Kirk fell silent, shut out of a place which Spock had clearly closed off from him. Then the Vulcan looked over at him, a sudden warmth in his eyes which seemed to reach out and envelope Kirk.

"I thought you had plans of your own."

Kirk cleared his throat. "I... I really don't make a very good Vulcan."

Spock raised one eyebrow and stood up. "Indeed. You are far too illogical," he half-teased.

Kirk crossed to the desk and stood, staring at the indecipherable sheets of paper. "Maybe I can help with that," he offered.

"I'm finished now." Spock put his stylus aside. "Besides, you... wouldn't understand it."

"It seems I don't understand a lot of things lately. Sometimes I find myself... slipping back into the way I felt on... Anthrania. I remember things I'd rather... forget," Kirk admitted.

Spock regarded him silently and there was pain in the depths of his eyes, pain for Kirk, for the brash, self-assured man he had known, now so hesitant and unsure of himself.

"Jim, perhaps you should not try to forget," Spock began, but suddenly Kirk looked in the direction of the front door, then swiftly crossed through the house and opened the door expectantly. Spock followed more slowly.

"That's funny," Kirk mused. "I could swear I heard the buzzer."

"I heard nothing," Spock supplied. He reached over and shut the opened door. Kirk still stood, staring at the closed door with a concentrated confusion. Spock touched his arm. "Jim?"

"Yeah," Kirk breathed, rallying. He looked over at Spock, realizing that what they had discussed this morning had been tactfully forgotten. His unspoken apology had been accepted. Kirk felt better, lighter, and he smiled.

"Let's take our lunch out by the trees today," he offered.

Spock covered his surprise at Kirk's erratic shifts of mood, becoming concerned over Kirk's disturbing flights. "If that's what you want," he agreed.

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It rained again for the next two days. Kirk acted like a caged animal, restless and nervous. He followed Spock around the house, complaining bitterly about the weather, the food, the boredom, anything he could find on which to vent his frustration. Spock grew increasingly worried about him and tried to interest him in various activities, but Kirk was never satisfied.

The third day dawned overcast and chill, with a light, misty rain developing in the afternoon. Despite the damp weather, Kirk insisted on going to the beach; they dressed warmly and ventured out. Once more, Kirk mentioned Spock's cataloguing of samples.

"This should be a good opportunity for you to collect some specimens," he commented as they strolled along the wet sand. "Look -- the rain's brought up a lot of little plants, and shells are all over the place."

Spock followed Kirk's pointing finger, ignoring his own discomfort at the miserable conditions. At least Kirk seemed more content out here. "Yes -- I see," he agreed non-committally.

"I can help you -- did you bring a sample case?" Kirk asked eagerly. Spock shook his head, hoping to put an end to it. But Kirk reached inside his poncho pocket for an empty plastic bag. "That's all right -- we can use this." He grinned at Spock with a boyish triumph. Spock sighed and resigned himself to the inevitable.

They worked side by side for some hours. Despite the water trickling down his nose and the dismal gloom of the sodden beach, Spock found to his amazement that he actually enjoyed the afternoon. Kirk was in a rare mood of good humor, leading the 'scientific expedition', teasing his 'Science Officer' in the old way. When they finally got back to the house, tired but relaxed, Kirk fell asleep in a chair while Spock prepared dinner. After a light meal, they both retired early.

Yet the night made James Kirk restless once again. Arising in the dark, not knowing what had disturbed his sleep, he made his way quietly to the living area. He poured himself a shot of brandy and sat in one of the large chairs.

After a moment, the unmistakable sound of movement reached his ears, footsteps broke his reverie.

"Jim? Are you in here?"

Kirk sighed, debated not answering, then replied, "Yes, Spock."

"Is something wrong?" Spock found him in the dark, not bothering with a light.

"No. I woke up -- came out for a drink. Is it against the rules?" He saw Spock straighten.

"I was not aware of any rules, Captain."

Kirk softened his voice. "I'm sorry if I woke you. Go on back to bed. I'm all right."

Spock seemed to hesitate, then he acquiesced. "Very well. I'll see you in the morning."

As Spock left the room, Kirk banged his fist on the arm of the chair, feeling completely at war with himself. He had wanted Spock to stay, to talk with him, yet he had sent him away. He had rejected Spock, rejected his own needs -- and why? Kirk felt as if he were his own worst enemy. Spock kept offering and Kirk continued to refuse. Suddenly the brandy tasted very bitter. He placed the glass on the nearby table and stood.

Outside Spock's partially opened door, he paused, but there was no sound within. Wearily, he returned to his own room.

After breakfast, which he had barely touched, Kirk pattered restlessly in the house, leafing through books in the library, flicking on the viewer to catch the news, then turning it off halfway through the broadcast. Spock had planned to catalogue the sea life specimens he had gathered at the beach the day before, but the Captain's nervousness made that task impossible. He looked up from the desk where he was trying to work as Kirk came into the room again and crossed to peer over the Vulcan's shoulder.

"Classifying your samples, Spock?"

Spock nodded patiently. "I am attempting to do so, Jim."

"Am I disturbing you?" Kirk looked disappointed. Spock sighed, laying down his tricorder.

"It isn't imperative that I do this now. Would you like to go for a swim?"

Kirk shook his head. "No... no, I don't feel like swimming this morning." He paced the room a few times while Spock watched, concerned.

"What's wrong, Jim?"

Kirk shrugged. "I don't know... the inactivity, maybe. The house... I feel... confined. I think I have to get out for a little while. You know, away from here... from the beach."

Spock was thoughtful for a moment. "Well, we could use some more supplies. I was going to dial them later, but why don't we take the car into town and pick them up?"

Kirk smiled. He could trust Spock to come up with a solution. "I have a better idea. You stay here and do your research and I'll go for the supplies."

Spock was dubious. "I can do this later. I don't mind going into town with you now."

Kirk reached out a hand as Spock started to rise. "Spock, please. I'd rather go alone. I need..." he stopped, catching the worried look on his friend's face. "I'll be all right. I don't need a keeper." The Vulcan lowered his eyes and Kirk realized how harsh his words had sounded.

"I did not mean to imply that you did," Spock said quietly.

Kirk's tone softened. "I know. I'm sorry. It's just that I need to be by myself a little while, need to get away. Do you understand?"

"It has not been my intention to make you feel 'watched.' However, lately... "

"-- I've been doing some rather strange things and you're worried. Okay, I admit I've been slightly tense, but, Spock, I'm only going to drive in for some supplies. Then I'll come back and we'll go for that swim." He tried to lighten the mood. "C'mon, you must admit you'd welcome the chance for a little solitude, too." The Vulcan relented a little under the Captain's persuasive tone, but he was still doubtful. "I'll be fine," Kirk concluded.

Kirk set the dials of the surface car to manual control and pulled out on the roadway, relishing the feel of the engine's response to his movements. The highway was deserted and Kirk felt some of his tenseness slipping away as he accelerated the speed, skimming along in command of the vehicle. Three weeks at the cottage, walking on the beach, swimming in the ocean, climbing the cliffs -- he had needed the privacy, the quiet change from the pressures of Starfleet and the Enterprise since his rescue. Yet the rest had not had the therapeutic effect that both he and Spock hoped. His Vulcan friend was concerned about him, Kirk knew, with due cause. He couldn't explain to himself the sleeplessness, the lapses of memory, the apparent clumsiness he had been experiencing. Something was wrong with him and he didn't know what. The ordeal on Anthrania was haunting him, affecting his ability to cope. Tortured dreams and memories plagued his nights and also crept into his waking hours. Adjustment would take time, he had told himself. Facing what had happened to his men, to himself, what he had done, would not be easy. Yet he had not expected this disorientation, this growing frustration. In a short while he would have to return to Starfleet, have to come to terms with his future plans, and he was no closer to a decision now than he had been when he had first returned from the prison camp.

He couldn't even begin to be sure what he wanted to do or what he would be capable of doing. In ten short -- or long -- months, depending on your point of view, Anthrania had changed his whole life. Values and ideals and goals had to be resorted. He was not the same James Kirk who had confidently and optimistically commanded the Enterprise. He had become someone else, changed by the experience on that tiny, hostile planet. He didn't know who this new person was, but whoever he had become he knew there was at least one other person and perhaps more, who would also be effected.

Spock had told him he wanted Jim Kirk back, but did that man still exist? How much of his former self was left in this body that wore the outward appearance of the Enterprise's Captain? Spock would stand beside him no matter what, and Kirk almost resented the responsibility this placed on him for the Vulcan's future. Yet his heart told him that feeling was unfounded and unworthy of the devotion he held for his friend. The thought of a future without Spock was almost unbearable.

The demands, the decisions, his own uncertainty surrounded him. Time wasn't going to help. Perhaps nothing would. He could find no answers; he could not even face the questions. He wanted to flee, yet running was no solution. He had survived Anthrania. He had fought to survive, but to what had he returned? Nagging thoughts tumbled about in his head until his mind fought back, erecting shields against the invading agony. Reality was unacceptable; awareness suffused into a mist of gray cotton. His hands gripped the steering mechanism, his knee pressed harder on the accelerator. The surface car reached higher speeds while its pilot watched a swirling image of fog through unseeing eyes.

Reality came crashing back with a sickening crunch. Too late, Kirk saw the large, stone structure looming before him. A second later, the surface car slammed to a halt as screaming metal collided with the wall. Off the road and out of control, Kirk braced for the impact. The tiny vehicle folded into twisted wreckage, yet its occupant remained secured to his seat. Jolted back into the present, Kirk could not think beyond this moment. He leaned forward, pressing his hands to his eyes. His head hurt, his body ached and dimly he could feel a warm wetness trickling down the side of his arm.

Spock glanced at the chronometer and felt a flash of uneasiness. Jim should have been back by now. He pushed the thought away. The Captain was right; he was becoming paranoid in his concern. Kirk had always been impulsive, a free spirit. Spock couldn't change that no matter how hard it was sometimes to watch that independent streak propel his friend toward danger.

Yet there was no danger in the small errand Kirk had chosen to perform. A starship captain was certainly able to drive to town for supplies.

Then why was he late?

Spock turned back to his work, trying unsuccessfully not to think about Jim. Kirk would be back shortly with some logical reason for the delay. The Vulcan knew he was reacting too strongly to a simple situation.

Yet what he had believed to be a simple leave had turned into ten months of agony for them both. He should have read the taut lines on Kirk's face when he left the Enterprise that day. He should have interpreted that almost imperceptible tenseness, the controlled exterior, and known that the Captain was hiding something. Not that it would have made any difference. Kirk had been about to undertake the Anthranian mission. Spock had let him go, believing that his attitude was caused by overwork and fatigue and that a rest was just what he needed.

His complacency exploded around him two weeks later when news of the capture broke and Kirk's real whereabouts were revealed. For the following ten months, Spock had lived through a nightmare. For all that time, Spock had waited, existing in a kind of limbo, obsessed with one purpose -- to have Kirk returned. His determination had finally been rewarded, yet Spock knew the agony was still not over.

Abruptly, he became aware of an insistent buzzing at the front door. He doubted that it was Jim, for the door was keyed to open at Kirk's touch. As the Vulcan headed to answer, he noticed an official vehicle parked outside. Two men in local uniforms stood on the step.

"Mr. Spock?" one of them questioned.

Spock nodded.

"Are you acquainted with a James Kirk? Says you two are leasing this cottage for a vacation."

Spock forced himself to answer evenly, suppressing a sudden anxiety. "That is correct. Is something wrong?"

"Your friend's had an accident. Speeding. Really smashed up that car. Must have had it on manual, then didn't pay attention to where he was going. We get these hot-shot tourists who think they can tear up the road."

Spock's eyes bore into the man. "Where is he?"

"At the medical center. He was lucky. I don't think he's too badly hurt, but they're checking him over. They sent me out to get you."

Spock's voice was tight. "Let's go."

The medical center in town was a small local clinic equipped to handle minor emergencies and illnesses. More complicated cases had to be transferred to the larger hospital facility in the next town. Spock was introduced to a resident physician, who was determined to obtain information from the Vulcan before he would release any news about Kirk. Seeming satisfied by the curt, precise answers, the doctor smiled at last and led the way to a small cubicle down one

of the corridors.

"Your friend was very fortunate. There doesn't seem to be any serious injury, but I didn't want to release him until someone came to accompany him. He's still rather shaken. I'll let you see him for a few moments, then I think the authorities will want to ask some questions before you leave." He indicated the cubicle, then left.

Kirk was seated on the side of an examining table, his hands folded in front of him, his head down. He looked up as Spock entered and grimaced. There were some cuts and bruises around his head and shoulders, and his wrist was encased in a plasticast, but Spock was not able to tell whether his expression of pain was from the injuries or something else. Spock crossed to him.

"The doctor told me you were not seriously hurt," he began, waiting for the reassurance from Kirk himself.

"Just some cuts and bruises and I sprained my wrist. Cracked a couple of ribs, but they fused them already."

"Are you in pain?"

Kirk shook his head. "Not much." It was partially true. His sense of shock and depression over what had happened overshadowed most of the physical hurt. He hesitated. "I'm... sorry you had to come."

Spock shook his head. "That doesn't matter. Jim, what happened?"

"I don't know, Spock, I really don't know. I was driving along... I had the car on manual and I was enjoying the ride... then, all of a sudden... I can't remember... I was off the road and there was a wall... around someone's property, they told me... and I couldn't stop. Spock, I don't know how I got there, how fast I was going... it's all a blank. One minute I was driving and then..." Kirk was becoming agitated. Spock drew closer to him, holding him with a look.

"Do not distress yourself, Jim. You are more shaken than you realize."

"But why can't I remember what happened?"

"You will," Spock answered calmly, covering the turmoil that raged within him, suppressing the terror he felt that Kirk might have been killed. He would not even allow himself to think of the consequences that Kirk's actions implied.

Kirk tried to match his friend's attitude and almost managed a smile.

"I'm afraid I should have listened to your suggestion that you go with me for the supplies. I guess I've sort of interrupted your work anyway."

Spock ignored the remark. "Jim, there is one ramification of this incident which you must consider."

Kirk frowned in consternation. "Yes... I must consider... what?" Absently, he stood and reached for his jacket from a nearby chair. Spock sighed heavily.

"Captain, I believe it would be better if Starfleet did not learn of this. It may appear... unacceptable conduct." He tried to phrase it as delicately as possible, not wishing to alarm Kirk with the suggestion of aberrant behavior.

"Oh." Kirk's reply was flat. He paused in the action of shrugging into his jacket and appeared to consider Spock's statement. "Well -- must they know? If I pay the fine..."

"Let me talk to the officials," Spock suggested quickly. "Perhaps I can persuade them not to file a report with Starfleet Command."

Kirk nodded passively. "All right. But hurry up, Spock. Whatever they gave me is making me kind of light-headed and I want to get home and lie down."

Kirk's total lack of concern spurred Spock to even more alarm. He found the officers who had brought him to the hospital and after a brief talk succeeded in circumventing normal pro-

cedures. The fine and the damages were paid and Spock smoothed over any trouble that may have been caused. Relieved, Spock returned to assure Kirk that everything was taken care of and to escort his Captain outside, where a newly rented surface car awaited them.

Kirk settled back, disregarding the warning light which indicated that his safety belt was not in use. He hated the confined feeling of it and refused to strap himself in. He was quite content just to relax and let Spock take the controls. Enough trying to do it on his own, enough fighting, struggling...

He couldn't understand why Spock had been so concerned about Starfleet learning of the accident. *I've done worse... and they know all about it, now.* Command image had become a bit ludicrous on Anthrania. He was too tired to worry about it -- too tired and too disgusted with himself.

Kirk closed his eyes, trying to block out everything, but despite the medication, sleep would not come. Instead, his mind replayed another memory, a vision of a time when he had almost given up. He tried to stop it, but he was transfixed as one in the throes of a nightmare.

... He lay where the guards had thrown him, unable to move, unwilling to get up. The rest of the men had been removed from the cell, taken to the courtyard for their work period, and he was alone with his pain and humiliation.

Ghi was right about one thing... I'm presenting a great command image...

He shuddered, a fresh spasm of pain twisting his gut as his abused kidneys and groin throbbed relentlessly. They certainly learned quickly which were our vulnerable areas... where to hit and hurt the most... Helpless, he was clutched by uncontrollable retching. He managed to raise himself slightly on one trembling elbow until it was over, then he sank back down, too sore and weak to move away from his mess.

The rest of Ghi's propaganda-filled tirade gnawed at his fading consciousness. Was Ghi telling the truth -- has the Federation already admitted their involvement here on Anthrania? Am I being played for a fool?

But... no. The Anties wouldn't bother getting a confession from me if the Federation had ... damn. Damn. My brains must be going soft to almost fall for that one.

Kirk groaned, aware again of his physical agony. He never would have believed the human body could take so much punishment and still function. His head throbbed from his captor's repeated blows and everything blurred. His bladder released, but he was hardly aware of the occurrence. Only semi-conscious, he instinctively tried to move away, failed and sank into a stupor of frustration and dulled pain.

Some time later, he was aware of the sound of footsteps approaching, shuffling, weary plops. The door hinge creaked, then clanged shut again. Without looking up, Kirk knew his fellow prisoners had been returned. Some deep instinct urged him to move, to get up, but he ignored it, too defeated to make the effort. Perhaps they wouldn't see him over in the corner.

"... the Captain!"

"Damn, what did they... "

"... for how long... "

Fragments of their reactions filtered through his lethargy and he was shocked by a wave of sympathetic vibrations. Someone touched his shoulder, tentatively at first, then more firmly.

"Jim... " Kirk identified the agonized whisper.

Marty... leave me alone... don't call me back... He had reached a point where it no longer mattered, nothing could touch him.

"... Jack, give me a hand! Jim, can you hear me? Can you move?"

Reluctantly, Kirk opened his swollen eyes a small slit. They were clustered around him, ignoring their own aches and injuries for the moment, focused in singular concern on his condition. It was both warming and frightening.

Anderson lifted Kirk's head from the puddle of filth and someone produced a cloth. Anderson began to wipe his face. Kirk flinched as bruises were touched and he tried to draw away, but Anderson and Langenberg held him firm.

"Easy... it's all right, now. Victor, get a blanket over here, will you? Dave, help Jack get these clothes off..."

Kirk wanted to scream at them to let him alone, let him sink back to the welcomed oblivion, but their ministrations were somehow therapeutic. One corner of his mind recognized what they were doing, knew that if he gave up, wallowed in his own filth, he would never find the strength of will to rise. And he knew it was important to these men that he did not fold.

Ghi's taunts returned to plague him. 'Some commander you are, Kirk. Look at your filthy, stinking carcass. Kirk -- Lord of the Scum. You're not fit to command a trash detail. Useless, putrifying abomination... so THIS is humanity at its finest, eh? Even my animals won't come near you...'

More rags were lent to the task; the men cleaned his unclothed body with an almost ritualistic fervor. Kirk was suddenly, unreasonably glad that this crew was not from the Enterprise. He recoiled from what he believed his shipmates would think if they could see him now. The Enterprise was an eternity away, in another dimension, one with which he was no longer associated, a dream image to be played in his imagination. Only today was real, only these men, yet they were also under his command.

How bizarre that we continue to preserve the proper military code, and I must be the leader, always the leader. I don't want to be responsible, I don't want the burden. I'm no better or worse than any man in this cell. We've all been reduced to something less than human. There is no rank in this situation.

The treacherous thoughts could be deadly. Perhaps proper military conduct seemed incongruous right now, but Kirk realized with sickening clarity that to slack up on that which they believed would defeat them all. Somehow they had to retain their civilization, their ideals, everything that spoke of what they were and where they had come from, if they were to maintain their identity. He opened his eyes and looked around him, seeing the fear in their faces and understanding the cause of that fear. If he were to buckle now, the entire fabric of their existence would be changed, and they would all be lost. It was not entirely fear for him, but fear for themselves which he saw in their eyes.

God, help us all... give me the strength... Slowly, painfully, Kirk tried to sit up. Victor Garcia wrapped the coarse blanket around him while Marty Anderson supported his shoulders.

"Better?" Anderson whispered. Kirk turned to meet his understanding gaze and managed a small smile of reassurance.

"If... they wanted me dead, they'd have been more thorough," Kirk grated. He started to add his thanks, then realized it wasn't necessary. Marty, better than any of them, had identified Kirk's state of mind.

"Can you make it to your mat?" Anderson encouraged.

"I think so..." Somehow strength was returning, the will to survive overpowering all else. Dave Wyman lent an arm as Anderson helped him to his feet. It was a pain-filled effort but with their support Kirk managed to reach his mat, and collapsed back down against the rough, hard pallet. Anderson sat beside him as the others gradually drifted away.

"It's not going to get any easier," Anderson observed. "They're going to throw everything they can at us."

"We'll be okay," Kirk assured, his stubborn pride surfacing. "They want to debase us, want to make us think we're only the vessel we live in. But this --" he touched Anderson's chafed and reddened hand, let his fingers trail up to cover an ulcerated sore on Anderson's forearm, "-- this isn't Martin Anderson, Starfleet Commander, and we both know it." Kirk's eyes glazed with unshed wetness. "They can't defeat us, not if we don't allow it. If we have to augment,

call upon an inner strength we didn't know we possessed, then we'll do it. All of us, Marty... all of us."

Anderson covered Kirk's hand with his own. "I hope you're right, Jim. But we can't do it without you."

"You don't have to. I'll be all right, now." Kirk closed his eyes, very tired.

"Good. That's right, get some rest. I'll wake you when the food arrives." Anderson stood, straightening the blanket over Kirk and giving his shoulder a gentle squeeze. Almost at once, Kirk slipped into a troubled sleep...

Suddenly, Spock was shaking his shoulder and Kirk was uncertain if he had been awake or asleep.

"Jim? We're here."

Kirk looked outside at the cottage. He shivered despite his thermal jacket and Spock reached over to help him out of the surface car.

Twilight was falling and the sky was magnificent, streaked with orange and pink and purple, a glorious sunset. They reached the porch and Kirk hesitated, almost reluctant to go in, despite his fatigue and medicated stupor. Down the beach, the waves were cresting at high tide and Kirk sighed, overwhelmed by the beauty of this spot which Spock had chosen. The Vulcan turned, anxious Kirk knew, to get him to lie down, but still Kirk persisted.

"It's so humbling, Spock," he said softly. "All the things I once took for granted. Freedom and clean air and sunsets -- and someone who cares. You keep on caring, and I keep on -- disappointing you."

"You have never disappointed me." There was a fierce huskiness in Spock's voice. "I accept your problems and I -- I want to share them. It is your duty to *let me* share them."

Kirk looked at him, still reluctant to accept the offer, but touched by the sentiment. Sadly, he shook his head. "Come on, let's go inside."

They let themselves into the house quietly.

Spock sat at his desk, pensively staring into space. Kirk had fallen asleep immediately after they reached the house, and Spock's inner timesense told him that the Captain had been sleeping for six hours and ten minutes.

The Vulcan had been sitting, watching his friend for the first hours, then satisfied that Kirk was all right, he had gone into the den, trying to find a means of distraction from the worry over Kirk. He found, however, that his thoughts kept returning to the man in the other room, to disquieting memories of the events since Kirk's return from Anthrania, his erratic behavior on the starbase. Kirk had burned himself under the steaming shower, been responsible for a number of minor personal injuries, wandered out in the rain on a rocky, storm-tossed coast, and shown signs of mental and physical fatigue daily. Yet the accident today had been too close a call, a mere stroke of fortune had prevented Kirk from being seriously injured or even killed by his loss of control. Logically, there was a progression in the incidents -- they were occurring more frequently and with more serious consequences. However much Spock wanted to believe Kirk when he insisted he would work things out if given enough time, the Vulcan knew it was not true. Kirk needed help, needed more than Spock knew how to give.

There was only a short amount of leave time left before Kirk would be expected to report back to Headquarters for a decision about his re-assignment, but the man with whom Spock had spent the past few weeks was in no condition to command a starship. If Kirk were to be tested

by Starfleet now, he could be grounded or placed in a token position to serve out his term-- or he might choose to resign from Starfleet completely. One way or another, such a decision could very well destroy his Captain. Kirk needed to command, needed his Enterprise, whether or not he realized it himself at this time. Spock had been with Kirk through many crises, had seen deeply into the man's soul. He knew the inherent force which drove Kirk to the excellence he achieved. Something was preventing his Captain from a complete recovery and Spock did not have the background to discover what it was.

He had tried to give all that he thought Kirk needed and it had not been enough. There was too much about the human psyche that Spock did not understand.

Yet there was someone, Spock knew, who cared for Jim Kirk too, one with, perhaps, more understanding of Kirk's problem. The time had come to call on McCoy, to ask the doctor for the help he had offered. Kirk needed McCoy, and Spock was forced to admit that he did, too. He was floundering in a very dangerous sea, and the prospect of sharing his lonely burden seemed inviting.

Spock reached over and drew the recorder toward him. Firmly, he pressed the tape button.

"To Doctor Leonard McCoy, aboard the USS Enterprise, from Commander Spock, Banoc-160. This message is to be sent priority urgent, personal code and scrambled... Doctor, the Captain's condition is rapidly deteriorating... "

- 8 -

On the morning after the accident, Kirk surprised Spock by electing to stay in bed, using his injuries as an excuse. Spock humored him, knowing that Kirk was over-reacting, yet relieved that it simplified his vigil. However, as the day wore on and Kirk continued to feign sleep every time Spock entered the room, the Vulcan grew concerned. It appeared that Kirk was withdrawing, trying to erect a barrier around himself. With mounting anxiety, Spock delivered his supper tray.

"Jim? You must eat something."

Awkwardly, Kirk struggled to sit up on the bed. Spock checked an impulse to help him.

"I'm not sure I can, Spock. My stomach doesn't feel right. Maybe I damaged something inside in the accident. Do you think that's a possibility?"

Kirk's uncharacteristic concern over his health and the unusual incident of hearing him complain chilled Spock. He tried to keep his voice level as he answered. "I hardly believe that the tests they ran at the medical center would not have shown such injuries, Captain." Spock settled the tray on the lap table and adjusted it over the bed.

"Mmm... I suppose. Still, I feel so... shaky. All I want to do is sleep."

"That's understandable," Spock agreed, "but you must consume some nourishment."

Kirk began to eat with indifference, a listless effort which seemed to tire him halfway through the meal. Finally he shoved the tray aside.

"That's enough. Spock, could you get me that other blanket in the closet? I feel... chilled. Perhaps I'm coming down with a cold."

Spock stood and stepped over to the bed, resting his palm against Kirk's forehead briefly. He frowned.

"There does not appear to be any fever. I'll get the scanner -- "

"That's not necessary," Kirk declined. "A good night's rest will help, I think."

"Would you like me to bring in the chess board?" Spock offered, reluctant to be dismissed.

"Not tonight." Kirk lay back against the pillows. Spock found the requested blanket and placed it over the bed.

"Very well, then. Will you be all right?"

"Yes. Just dial down the light, will you?" Already, Kirk was closing his eyes, drawing his sprained wrist close to his chest with a pained grimace. Spock sighed heavily and left the room, leaving the door open so he could observe Kirk from the living area. With the Captain so totally uncommunicative, there was little he could do. Troubled, he went out to watch the restless sea.

... In the dark and lonely night, in the frightening cold of night, the assault continued. Terror, more easily controlled by day, assumed gargantuan proportions after the lights had been extinguished.

Their captors now employed a new technique -- subtle and devastating. Several days ago, the community cell had been abolished and each prisoner had been sequestered in an individual warren, all the cage-like holes lining both sides of a long, narrow corridor. The ten men were unevenly spaced, separated by at least one empty cell on either side and across the hall, so there could be no method of communication. Talking was forbidden and guards enforced the rule by constant monitor.

At random intervals by day and night, a guard would arrive and walk slowly and heavily down the aisle, open one cell and drag out the occupant for an interrogation session with Ghi. Then, from another part of the cellblock they could all hear the sounds of beating, scuffling, groans of pain and cries of agony until, finally, the unfortunate chosen from among them was returned to his cell with a thud.

After the fourth day of this procedure, Kirk lay on his mat and tried to quiet the scream of his nerves. He wondered how long the Anties would continue the tactic, how long it would be before one of his men broke under the extreme pressure. He had no way of knowing what anyone else was saying under interrogation, or what they were thinking; he had no way of reassuring them, exerting his command or unifying them. They were each totally alone, helplessly at the mercy of their enemy.

Kirk had been to the interrogation room twice, and each time he heard the guards' approach he drew back against the farthest wall of his cell, knowing that pain was coming, either for himself or for one of his comrades.

Suddenly, in the quiet darkness, the dreaded sound of slow, heavy footsteps began. Kirk froze, coiled tighter into a ball. The steps drew nearer. Would they pass by him this time, or would they stop? His breathing quickened in a paroxysm of fear and loathing. Half of him cried for them to take him, to spare the others, yet the other half of him screamed in silent, self-preserving denial.

The footsteps stopped and so did Kirk's breathing as he heard the scraping of a key in the lock on his cell. With a thin squeaking the large metal door swung inward. He let out his breath in a rush. He had been selected and, somehow, there was comfort in the knowing. Somehow it was easier to endure a beating than to stay behind with unknown terror. Here, at least, was an enemy whom he could face.

Then the memories of his previous visit to the interrogation room crowded in on him and he struggled with the guards, determined not to go easily. He would make them earn their pay -- he was not a lamb to be led to the slaughter. A stick slammed into his solar plexus and he doubled over, tightening as they dragged him out and down the hall.

Shoved into the big room, he was stripped and searched in the usual way. Ghi entered and the interrogation began. Kirk's hands and feet were chained and he was beaten severely for refusing to cooperate.

He tried to block out the pain, not to cry out, but as time passed it became increasingly difficult. He screamed, lusty epithets turning to sobs as the beating continued and became more ferocious. For a long time nothing existed except the pain and the sound of Ghi's raised voice shouting questions at him. Blood from a cut on his forehead oozed down, obscuring his vision, tinting his world red. Hatred ran like venom through his system, pouring fire into his abused body. Finally he felt the darkness approaching, welcomed it like a friend, giving himself over to its peace. He went with the downward spiral, feeling no more, seeing no more, and for a while, being no more.

He awoke, only minutes later, to see Ghi looming over him. He had been released from the chains and was lying on the floor.

"Next time," Ghi intoned gravely, "you will tell me."

The guards lifted him and dragged him back to his cell, throwing his clothes in behind him. Still only partially aware, Kirk crawled naked to the pallet and collapsed. The one spark of satisfaction was that this time it had been him and not someone else. And now, the waiting began anew...

"S S P P O O C C K K... "

The Vulcan, dozing in the chair by the window wall, was startled awake by the sound of movement in Kirk's room and the plaintive, almost pathetic calling of his name. He was on his feet at once, alert and heading toward the sound. In the darkened room he found Kirk standing at the window, his back toward the door. Before Spock could speak, Kirk called again in a voice more like a whimper than anything else.

"Here, Captain." At Spock's reply, Kirk whirled and the Vulcan was shocked at the look of desperation on the other man's face. Even in the dimness he could see that he was extremely agitated.

"Spock... Spock... I didn't think you were asleep," Kirk said, coming toward him.

"No, I was not. Is something wrong?"

Kirk had come to stand close to Spock and he reached out with his uninjured arm and took the Vulcan's hand in his own. "I... didn't want to be alone. I... needed..." he faltered, uncertain.

Spock had perceived the state of disorientation in Kirk before, but somehow this was different. Kirk seemed more aware of his surroundings, yet almost fearful. "Another nightmare, Jim?"

Kirk shook his head. "No, I wasn't asleep... I couldn't." He seemed to suddenly notice that he was holding Spock's hand, dropped it immediately as his eyes darted about the room wildly. He hugged himself as though he were cold and shivered. "Spock, please..."

Alarmed, Spock reached out. "Jim, you're trembling. Are you cold? What is it -- are you in pain?"

As Spock's hand met his arm, Kirk withdrew. "No, don't touch me! I mean... yes, please... you can... touch me..."

"Where does it hurt?" Spock was becoming more concerned, and Kirk's strange attitude confused him.

Kirk took Spock's hand and laid it on the side of his head, covering it with his own hand. "Here," he said. "My head hurts, here... and my wrist, a little..." He leaned into Spock's hand, then with his other he reached up to touch Spock's head in the same place. "Oh, Spock, it... I ... want... need..." His voice was soft, his fingers absently caressing the

Vulcan's cheek.

"Jim, let me bring something to help you."

"No, I don't want anything. Only... *you* help me."

"How?" Spock was seeking, frightened. "How can I help you?"

Abruptly, Kirk pulled away. "I don't know!" It was a sob, then he pitched forward, clutching at his stomach. "My stomach. God, it hurts," he moaned.

Shaking, Spock took him by the shoulders. "Come -- get into bed and lie down."

Kirk allowed himself to be led to the bed, but he sat on the side and leaned forward.

"I could hear them coming down the hall. They made sure we knew when they were coming... and part of me wanted them to stop, to take *me* and the other part was terrified they would."

"The Anthranians?" Spock asked, trying to follow Kirk's rambling words.

"We knew whoever they chose would be in for a rough time, but being alone was so... so... horrifying, too. Spock?" He lifted searching eyes to the Vulcan's face. "I've never felt so ... alone in my whole life."

Kirk's statements were making no sense and Spock was at a loss to answer him. In clipped, cut-off sentences Kirk seemed to be talking about incidents on Anthrania, yet there was a touch of the present in his words.

"You are not alone now, Jim," Spock finally said.

"We are all alone," Kirk mourned. "You -- me -- all the strangers who pass by in our lives..." He drew his knees up, wrapping his arms around them, and began a rocking motion on the bed.

Spock reached out a hesitant hand to the huddled shoulders, uncertain if the contact would be rejected again, but this time Kirk sagged against him; allowing an embrace, Kirk snuggled against the Vulcan's chest. Suddenly, his breathing quickened. In a swift movement, he unwrapped his arms from his legs and reached up to encircle Spock's neck. With a gentle, fierce tug he pulled the Vulcan's body to the bed. For several moments, as Kirk held on to him, half clinging, half hugging, Spock did not move. The human's breath came in short gasps, his eyes were squeezed shut against some inner tension that the Vulcan dared not breach. Kirk was coiled into a tight knot of desperation as Spock sought frantically for something to do to relieve it. Yet, so strange was this urgent, demanding need of Kirk's that Spock could not interpret its meaning. He knew only that the open vulnerability of this man, seeking, wanting, needing... *something*, was overpowering him with a reciprocal need/desire to give, protect... destroy the haunting images that plagued Kirk's mind. He tightened his embrace, pulling Kirk closer as though through physical contact their selves could merge and strengthen. At once, he felt Kirk stiffen in his arms. The breathing slowed and Kirk tried to pull away. When Spock did not immediately release him, Kirk spoke in a ragged, pain-filled whisper.

"Let go of me, Spock." It was both a demand and a plea.

Spock dropped his arms and Kirk stood up quickly and walked away from the bed. For a long while neither man spoke or moved. Kirk had retreated to a corner of the room and had slid down the wall to the floor. He sat, trembling, huddled, his whole body on fire with an unknown agony. On the bed, tense and motionless, Spock tried to control the nerve-searing reaction he felt to Kirk's erratic behavior. Logic and reason failed him against the onslaught of the other's chaotic emotions and he struggled for a semblance of order in a situation where none existed. He could not trust himself to act, although the charged silence from across the room demanded that he do something. Kirk needed not to be alone, had in fact pleaded against it, yet in his turbulent attitude he seemed reluctant to accept Spock's involvement.

Steeling himself to meet resistance, Spock managed, after a while, to rise and approach the desolate figure crouched in the corner. As he neared, the human appeared to withdraw, although he had not actually moved.

"Jim, please get up. You cannot stay here." The calm quiet in Spock's voice surprised even himself. Kirk relaxed a little and looked up to meet the concerned gaze.

"I'm all right, Spock."

Spock let out a breath. "Then, will you come to bed?"

"When I'm ready." Kirk's voice was determined.

There was a pause, then Spock ventured, "Shall I leave?"

Panic surfaced in the boyish features. "No!"

Spock lowered himself to the floor beside Kirk, careful that he did not touch him. They sat for a few moments, then Kirk's unexpected laughter broke the silence.

"This is a helluva situation -- both of us sitting on the floor in the corner of a bedroom in the middle of the night. Can you imagine what McCoy would say if he could see us?"

The bemused expression on Spock's face was lost in the darkness. "I foresee that the doctor would enjoy several suitably caustic remarks."

"Yeah, he would," Kirk said fondly. He stirred, rose to his feet and held out a hand to Spock. "C'mon, Commander, get up."

Spock did not take the proffered hand, but gained his feet on his own. Kirk let the outstretched arm fall to his side. It hung there like a dead weight, and he turned away.

"I'm not very good at saying I'm sorry," he said.

Pain shot through the Vulcan. "Jim, there is no need..." he began urgently.

"Oh, there is a need," Kirk interrupted, "... in me... one I can't explain, can't define ... but it hurts and keeps on hurting... you."

"That is not true," Spock lied.

Kirk smiled mirthlessly, turning to face him. "Vulcans are terrible liars, my friend. Don't you think I know you're suffering because of me? You're so patient... so caring." He put his hands on Spock's arms and was satisfied when he didn't flinch. "I don't want to hurt you, Spock, but I can't help... I don't know what's happening to me."

"Jim, you will work it out." Spock's voice was husky.

"Will I? Those damned barbarians have turned my life upside down. I don't know if I'll ever get it right again." His fingers dug into Spock's flesh. "That stinking hell-hole of nothingness has destroyed everything it touched. It's reaching out, trying to destroy you, too."

"Jim, please..." Spock sensed the agitation and fear returning to consume Kirk.

"Don't let it, Spock," Kirk pleaded. "God, let there be one whole, clean spot in my life that those bastards can't touch."

"Jim, it will not destroy me... or you."

"Won't it, Spock?" Kirk demanded. He loosened his grip, letting his hands slide up and down Spock's arms. He paused for a moment; Spock didn't move. Then, abruptly, he dropped his hands. "Oh, shit," he said. Turning, he crossed to the bed and flung himself face down across it. Spock followed and stood staring down at the labored breathing that was an indication of Kirk's effort to calm himself.

"Stay with me, Spock," he said without turning. "In that chair... just so I'll know you're there."

Slowly, they both began to relax. Spock sat and watched until unintelligible mumblings and

quiet, abandoned movements from the bed told him that Kirk had fallen into a restless sleep. The strange paradox of Kirk's actions chilled and frightened him.

There had been a burning need in Kirk tonight. He had sought yet refused Spock, and the Vulcan forced himself to examine his reactions. There had been a fire in Spock, too, ignited by Kirk, for Kirk, to offer, give, fulfill, whatever it was that Kirk's tormented soul craved. It had not been enough. They had failed and been failed, lost in frustration, unable to discover the source of the pain. Spock leaned toward the sleeping human, wanting to touch, console, shield him from the sorrow, the hurt, needing as much as Kirk the tactile assurance that only physical contact could produce. He paused, checking his response. An intangible ache held him, prevented him from completing the motion. He slumped back in the chair. Somewhere in this labyrinth of darkness there must be a light, but Spock could not find it and Kirk was drifting farther away.

Spock finally admitted to himself that he no longer knew this man who had returned from a ten month nightmare. He shivered as a wave of grief washed over him. More than anything in the universe he had wanted Kirk back -- whole of body and mind -- as before. Yet now, as his Captain slept, not three feet away, Spock felt more alone, more desolate than ever.

Unless McCoy could help him, restore him, Kirk may very well be lost for good. It was a very heavy burden to place on such an emotional being as the doctor. Spock wondered if McCoy had the skill or if he himself had the confidence in his ability. Then he realized that right now help could come from no other quarter. The three of them together had to find a way.

After a while, the Vulcan's troubled thoughts receded and he, too, slept lightly in the chair.

THREE

During the next several days, Spock decided he had been justified in sending for McCoy. The Captain's mental and physical state seemed to be deteriorating daily since the accident. He was extremely agitated, nervous and withdrawn. He slept much of the day, yet his nights were restless, tormented by nightmares. He seldom went outside the cottage, still uncharacteristically using various physical ailments as an excuse.

Neither man mentioned the night in Kirk's room, although it was obvious that each had been grimly affected by it. The Captain seemed to draw farther into himself, unwilling or unable to approach Spock on more than a very superficial level. And Spock, uncertain how much to push his friend, kept his distance and waited in a state of near anxiety, clinging to the hope that McCoy would be able to direct them.

Spock had received a communication from the doctor, giving his arrival time and the advice, with which Spock agreed, not to mention his expected visit to Kirk. McCoy had said he would take care of it when he got there.

Although McCoy had prepared to leave the Enterprise immediately after receiving Spock's message, and even traveling at warp speeds, the journey took over a week planet-time. For the Vulcan, the days dragged with a painful slowness that his training told him had no root in logic.

Finally the time did pass, and Spock met the day of McCoy's expected arrival with hopeful anticipation. As usual, Kirk had returned to bed after reluctantly toying with the breakfast Spock had urged him to eat. He had declined Spock's suggestion that they walk on the beach awhile, claiming a severe headache.

An hour later, when Spock checked on him, he was apparently asleep, the shades of his room drawn against the planet's bright sunlight. Spock pattered in the house briefly, then,

because he knew Kirk enjoyed some of the local sea delicacies, decided to go down to the beach to check some traps he had set earlier in the hopes of whetting the Captain's almost non-existent appetite at dinner. He would be back long before McCoy was due and Spock thought perhaps he could coax Kirk to get up and dressed so that he might be feeling a little better when their friend arrived.

The room was quiet, cool and dim, and Kirk's head pounded in cadence with the steady thrum of the ship's engines. *She was always demanding, this silver mistress he commanded. Or did she command him? Spock had wanted him to go for a walk on the beach, but didn't he know that was not possible for the Captain of the Enterprise? Duty... there was always duty. Fourteen lives depended on him. No... not fourteen. Four hundred and thirty... and all those damned Ambassadors and dignitaries... How in hell was he supposed to keep them from each others' throats? It would serve them right if he threw the lot of them together and let nature take its course. The survival of the fittest... But there was that little matter of diplomacy. Barbarians trying to act civilized and his ship as their testing ground. That's it, good old James T., keep everybody happy, don't create incidents and never mind that you have a ship to run, too. Now take Ambassador Sarek, for instance. Forgetting that he's Spock's father, he's one of the worst of them, creating that argument with GHI. GHI... no, that's not it... not GHI, Gav. Ambassador Gav, a Tellerite... he opposed the Coridon admission. Then... who in the hell is GHI? Oh, yes. The Anthranian. Who let him on the Enterprise? Oh, no, he'd draw the line at that... GHI did not belong on his ship... damn their bureaucratic asses... He'd have something to say about who he had to transport. He would not deal with barbarians.. Let the hierarchy answer to their demands if they wanted, James Kirk would not kowtow to GHI. Damn, no wonder he had a headache! Well, maybe he ought to just set the officials straight right now... maybe he ought to just beam down to the Starbase and see the Admiral, let him know that this Captain wasn't giving into the Anthranians and they could take this assignment and... only, hell, his head hurt so much... he was so tired... duty, always duty. He dragged himself up from the bed and punched his intercom.*

"Spock, take the con. I'm beaming down to the Starbase."

Outside, the bright sunlight almost blinded him and he squinted his eyes against the increasing pain in his head.

Spock entered the cottage with the catch he had taken from the traps and deposited the pail of delicate little shellfish in the kitchen. He had been gone longer than he had planned. On the beach, some local fishermen had accidentally run a small craft into some shale and rocks near where Spock's traps had been set and he had been prevailed upon to assist them in freeing the tiny boat.

The silence of the house told him that Kirk must still be asleep. He had hoped Jim would have risen on his own by now, but he supposed he would have to awaken him. McCoy would be arriving shortly, if his time schedule were correct.

Kirk's room seemed almost like a tomb compared to the cheery brightness of the rest of the house. Spock had chosen the cottage partially because even on cloudy days the abundance of large windows let in enough natural light to make using the artificial unnecessary during the day. He had felt this would help Kirk forget the confines of ship and prison and bolster his spirits, make him feel more free. For a while it had, but lately Kirk's penchant for keeping the heavy shades of his room drawn had thrust the area into a feeling of gloom.

Spock's eyes adjusted immediately to the dark and he knew at once that Kirk was not there. The bed was rumpled, but there was no sign of its former occupant. Panic, terrorizing, sickening panic, claimed him and even as he called the name, he knew Kirk was not in the house.

Cursing himself for leaving Kirk unattended in his condition for even a short while, Spock ran out the front door. He came to a halt. His eyes raked the beach in both directions and although he could see people scattered far away, he could not tell if any of them were Kirk.

He forced himself to take a breath, to consider logically where Kirk might have been. Perhaps he had wanted to walk on the beach after all, but in view of Kirk's recent behavior, it seemed rather unlikely. The vision of Kirk, wandering about, confused, the night of the storm, kept slamming into Spock's thoughts. And Kirk had become much worse since then.

Needing to do something, yet not knowing where to begin, Spock headed down the beach. He tried to put himself in Kirk's place, to think like the Captain might, but it was impossible. Kirk was no longer thinking and acting like the rational Captain Spock knew. He was depressed, withdrawn, a very sick man with a recent record of memory loss and disorientation. He could be anywhere, could have gone in any direction, and in his state of confusion, anything was possible.

After over an hour of futile scanning of the beach, Spock gave up that course and headed back to the cottage. He was so distraught himself that his own thought processes were becoming distorted; he had to take time to consider a more viable plan of action.

There must be alternatives. Even at this point he was loathe to seek official assistance for fear of unnecessarily alerting Starfleet of Kirk's condition. This had been a prime consideration of Spock's in every incident that had occurred. Kirk had to have the chance to resolve his problems without the fleet's interference. His career, his future may depend on it.

As Spock neared the cottage he saw a small, silver, private aircar docked on the pad beside the house. His heart jumped; at first, he thought it might be someone with word of Kirk. Then, he suddenly remembered the time and realized to whom the aircar must belong.

The familiar figure dressed in civilian clothes came to the door as Spock approached. He had apparently been watching for someone.

"Well, this is a fine thing," McCoy began gruffly. "I've been waiting here nearly an hour. If I hadn't seen some of your things around, I wouldn't have known I had the right place. Where the hell have you been?"

Spock bristled at McCoy's tone. "I'm sorry, Doctor. I've been..." He didn't get a chance to finish. McCoy, noticing the look of distress, cut him off.

"Where's Jim?"

"I do not know." Spock's voice held an edge of defeat.

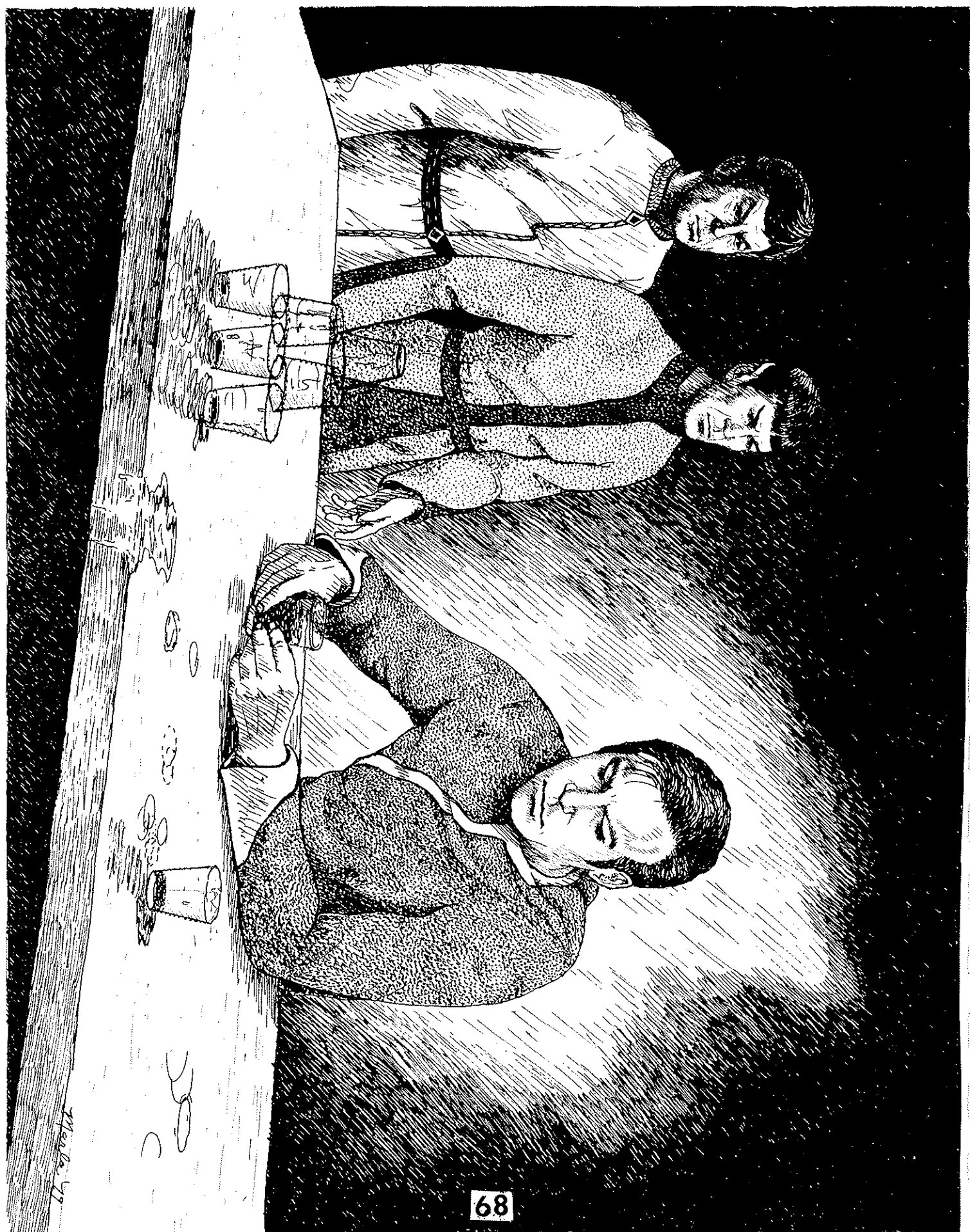
"You don't know? What do you mean, you don't know? I thought you said Jim needed... what in blazes is going on, Spock? I came halfway across the galaxy because you said Jim was going to pieces and now you tell me you don't know where he is!"

Spock drew in a breath, trying to gain some measure of control against the onslaught of McCoy's outburst. "Doctor, if you will try to subdue your reactions and give me a chance to answer, I will try to explain what has happened."

McCoy quieted. His own worry over Spock's message, the long, hasty trip to Banoc-160 and the unexpected incident of having to wait for almost an hour was causing him to over-react. The look on Spock's face did nothing to encourage a feeling of optimism.

"I have been looking for the Captain for over an hour," Spock said. "Come into the house and I will relate all of the current events to you."

Aware of the danger of wasting time, yet with a need to be precise, Spock told McCoy in brief but thorough detail about the last few days. He described Kirk's attitude and condition, and finally told what had taken place that day. When he had finished, McCoy shook his head.



"Damn it, Spock. I can't understand why you left him alone. You should have known something like this could have happened."

"The 'why' is unimportant, Doctor," Spock said impatiently. "We are wasting time debating the obvious. I suggest we start searching again."

McCoy sighed. "All right, Spock. You've already checked the beach. Maybe he headed in another direction. Why don't we try that? If he were walking he may not have gotten too far. Let's go." He caught Spock with a look of confidence.

Spock nodded. They moved out of the house -- together -- to find the Captain.

At McCoy's suggestion, they climbed into the aircar and headed slowly for the nearby town. They covered the fifteen miles in a zig-zag pattern, McCoy watching to the right, Spock to the left. There was no traveler on the road or anywhere in either direction as far as they could see. At last they arrived in town and set down on a landing pad with a thud of finality. They were running out of places to look, and if Kirk were not in the town, neither man knew where else to try.

"I doubt if he would have wandered this far," Spock commented uneasily, glancing at the various places where a man could be concealed. There were restaurants, stores, bars, Media and Activity Centers, even a large park. It would take hours to search them all, and soon the sun would be fading.

"Where else is there to look?" McCoy countered. They both knew that the answer to that question could very well be back at the beach, in that rough spray of water which led out to the Cardiff Ocean. No, McCoy decided, he would not consider such an alternative. Kirk had to be somewhere in town.

They walked, silent with each other as tension built. McCoy regretted the harsh accusations he had thrown at Spock. The Vulcan was coiled, frightened beyond the limits of logic. Spock had done his best and it hadn't been enough. If anything happened to Jim, Spock would unfairly blame himself, McCoy realized.

They lost count of the establishments they entered, glancing quickly but thoroughly over the occupants. Daylight waned, artificial light flooded the sidewalks and still there was no trace of Kirk.

"Perhaps we should alert the authorities," McCoy ventured.

"No. Not yet." Spock's answer was tight, emphatic. McCoy understood. They could not bare Jim's weakness to anyone else. If Kirk were all right, they must not embarrass him.

Together they entered the next dimly lit tavern. It was the dinner hour and the place was virtually deserted. Down at the far end of the bar, a lone customer sat nursing a drink, a pyramid of empty glasses built on the shiny surface in front of him. McCoy started with the shock of relief and recognition.

"Spock! There..." He couldn't finish, his voice wouldn't cooperate. The Vulcan moved forward, leaving him to trail behind.

"Jim?" Spock stood behind Kirk's stool, causing the Captain to turn three quarters to face him. Kirk's face lit with bemused delight as McCoy perched on the stool to his left.

"Spock... Bones... what are you two doing here?" he asked lightly, genuinely surprised.

"I was just going to ask you the same thing," McCoy drawled easily, stilling the slam of his own heart. There was something out of synch in Kirk's attitude, something which warned him to proceed with caution.

"Have a drink?" Kirk offered, indicating his own glass.

"We've been looking for you," Spock ventured, still poised uncertainly behind Kirk.

"Why?" Kirk responded blankly. "Trouble on the ship, Spock? Why didn't you just use the communicator? I..." Kirk reached to the back of his waist, then looked confused by the loss of his belt and instruments.

McCoy hastily put a hand on his arm. "Easy, Jim, it's all right now. Can you tell me what you've been doing?"

"Sittin' here," Kirk answered vaguely. "Nothin' wrong with a man enjoying his shore leave, is there?"

"Why did you leave the house without telling me?" Spock asked before McCoy had a chance to forestall him. The doctor had recognized that Kirk was out of touch with his present reality, and he knew they must not confuse him with too many questions. The important thing now was to get him away from here, back to the house where McCoy could examine him more closely.

"Spock, quit playin' around," Kirk chuckled. "I left word on the ship where I'd be... didn't I?" The levity ended on a tone of distress.

"Sure you did," McCoy placated. "C'mon, Jim. Come with us." He stood, slipping a hand under Kirk's elbow.

Trustfully complacent, Kirk put his feet on the floor and attempted to rise.

"All right. Where are we going?" His knees buckled at the sudden movement and McCoy grabbed at him to break his fall. Spock shoved the stool out of his way to lend support from the other side. Together, they balanced Kirk as he regained his stance.

"Just a little way," McCoy answered softly. "We'll find a place where you can lie down. Trust your old sawbones," he murmured.

"Sure -- don't I always?" Kirk smiled, extracting himself from their protection. He wobbled a few steps away. "Wow -- I think I had one Folly too many," he protested. Spock, still at his side, took his arm again.

"It's not far," the Vulcan assured, picking up McCoy's lead. "We have a car."

"You'll feel better once you get out in the fresh air, Jim," McCoy continued, as they reached the street. Kirk was walking straighter now, regaining his faculties of movement.

"I'll be glad when this mission is over. Stuffy diplomats..." Kirk mused cryptically.

"Who, Jim?" McCoy prompted.

"Oh, all of them. Sorry, Spock, but your father's one of the worst."

McCoy saw Spock tense as the chilling vision of disorientation was slammed home.

"Hey, why don't we just beam up?" Kirk asked suddenly, reaching again for the elusive communicator.

"Unnecessary, Captain," McCoy filled in smoothly. "Here's the car now. Come on -- get in," he coaxed.

"You'll do anything to avoid that transporter, won't you, McCoy?" Kirk chuckled, still playing the scene without question.

Little was said on the short ride to the beach cottage. Spock fingered the controls absently, letting the automatic pilot take over. McCoy watched as Kirk lapsed into a contented silence, lost in a world of his own making.

"Has this ever happened before, Spock?" he questioned quietly.

"No. There have been... moments of disorientation, as I've already related, but nothing

like this." Spock glanced uneasily at Kirk, reluctant to talk this way in front of him.

"It's all right -- he doesn't understand," McCoy explained, interpreting Spock's concern. "Between the mental fatigue and the alcohol, he's lost touch with reality."

"Temporarily?" Spock asked. McCoy shook his head.

"I don't know."

Gently, they led Kirk into the cabin. Kirk looked around in appreciation.

"Home at last," he grunted, rubbing a dirty hand over his face.

"Do you know where you are?" McCoy asked.

"Of course -- why wouldn't I?"

"Okay, just checking," McCoy soothed. "Sit down on the couch, Jim. Spock, get my bag, will you?"

"Are you going to examine me?" Kirk asked curiously.

"Do you mind?"

"No, I suppose not. I haven't felt too good lately."

"Why? What's the problem?"

"I don't know."

Spock deposited the bag at McCoy's feet and pulled a footstool over to the couch and sat beside them.

"All right, let's see if I can guess," McCoy went on, running the scanner slowly. "How did you crack your ribs?" he questioned.

"I don't know." There was no trace of worry in the answer.

"When he crashed the surface car -- " Spock began.

"I... crashed the car?" Kirk puzzled.

McCoy took his hand and turned it over to examine the nearly healed cut on his finger. "That's a pretty deep wound. Did you cut yourself?"

"I don't know... I don't remember."

"On a knife," Spock supplied. "It was an accident."

"Yes... an accident," Kirk agreed.

McCoy sighed. "There's also evidence of a recent burn across your chest and throat. What caused that?"

"I don't... Spock, what caused that?" Kirk looked at the Vulcan in anticipation of his answer.

"You had the shower controls too high," Spock reminded him gently.

"Yes, of course."

"Jim, what's your brother's name?"

"My... brother? George Samuel Kirk. Why?"

"Where is he?" McCoy persisted.

"He... died... was killed. You know that, Bones. We found his... body on Deneva."

"Okay. Now, where are you?"

"On Starbase Three. Where are *you*?" Kirk chuckled.

"Right here with you, Captain, right with you. Can you do this?" McCoy held his hand out in front of his own face and slowly brought his fingertips to his nose. Kirk repeated the action and then complied as McCoy put him through a series of neurological tests.

"Jim, where were you today? How did your hands get so dirty? Did you fall down?"

Kirk contemplated his hands. "Yes -- I *am* dirty, aren't I?" He stood up unexpectedly.

"Where are you going?" Spock asked, rising with him.

"To wash up... I don't want to be dirty. Got to keep clean... "

"Good idea," McCoy encouraged. "Spock, let's get him to bed now. There's little more we can do at the moment." He turned to Kirk. "Tired, Jim?"

"Yeah... a little. Spock?"

"Yes, Jim?"

"You'd better call the ship. Tell them where we are."

"As you wish, Captain."

"C'mon, Jim. I'll help you get ready for bed," McCoy offered, not permitting him to be alone for a moment. "Then I'll give you something to make you relax. It's going to be all right, Jim. It's going to work out." Gently insistant, he led Kirk toward the bathroom, continuing the soothing words as much for his own benefit as for Kirk's.

Inwardly appalled at the situation he had discovered, McCoy was already leaping ahead professionally, laying the groundwork for what he knew he would have to accomplish. He prayed for the strength and skill to make it work.

- 2 -

A persistant golden sun worried Kirk into a wakefulness which his senses resisted. Damn, why weren't the shades drawn? Spock usually darkened his room so he could rest uninterrupted, he remembered, his thoughts still groggy with sleep. He tried to return to his limbo world, but his body betrayed him, urged him to wake up. Gingerly, he opened his eyes and the brightness of the room hammered at his skull with a thundering assault. Moaning, his hands flew up to keep the top of his head from coming off. God, he must have had a bad night. He couldn't remember, but he felt like he had been drugged or drunk or both.

At last he determined to try again and was slightly more successful. He made it to a sitting position, slowly swinging his legs over the side of the bed. Still holding his head, he managed a squint, this time withstanding the light. He let his hand slide across his lips. His mouth was dry as cotton.

Dimly, he could hear voices coming from another part of the cottage -- the precise, clipped tones of his First Officer and the soft southern drawl of McCoy. McCoy? Abruptly, awareness jolted him to the present.

Opening his eyes fully, Kirk forgot about his condition and concentrated on listening, puzzled. The conversation in the other room continued. He couldn't make out the words but the voices were unmistakable. Quickly, he got to his feet, ignoring his throbbing head and aching limbs. He pulled on his robe and headed toward the direction of the sounds.

Spock and McCoy were in the den, so deep in discussion that they didn't notice his entrance.

"Bones!" The sound of his own voice, a mixture of surprise and delight, reverberated in Kirk's brain. The other two looked up, also surprised, then McCoy grinned sheepishly and crossed toward him. He reached out, gripping Kirk affectionately on the arms.

"Mornin', Jim," he drawled.

"How... when... what are you doing here?" Kirk stammered.

"I came to visit you. Aren't you at least going to say you're pleased to see me?"

"Well, yes, but... "

"How are you feeling, Jim?" McCoy asked.

"Never mind that. I want to know how you got here."

"You look like hell," McCoy observed clinically.

"Bones!"

"All right. I was anxious about how the two of you were getting along, so I thought I'd better come see for myself."

"When did you arrive?" Kirk asked, not fully buying McCoy's story.

"Last night."

"Last night? I... can't remember..." Kirk trailed off, bothered by his frequent lapses of memory.

"You were asleep," Spock interrupted. "We didn't want to disturb you."

Kirk met the Vulcan's eyes, disbelieving for a moment, then dropped his gaze, frowning.

"I've got a helluva headache this morning. I'm sorry, Bones, this doesn't seem to be one of my better days."

"Why don't you wash up, Jim, while Spock orders some juice and maybe a little breakfast for you. That'll make you feel better," McCoy said.

Kirk smiled. "Doctor's prescription?"

McCoy returned the smile. "You just leave everything to me. I'll have you feeling like a new man in no time."

Kirk hung his head. "I wish..." He stopped, then reached up to squeeze McCoy's shoulder. "I'm glad to see you, Bones."

Kirk showered and dressed, then washed away the cotton taste from his mouth with a cold glass of juice. Although he was feeling a bit more tolerable, he found his stomach still rebelled at the breakfast Spock had ordered. He forced a few token bites to appease the concerned Vulcan. McCoy kept up a light conversation, but Kirk, familiar with the doctor's methods, was aware of the keen blue eyes observing him, making mental notes of his reactions.

The Captain was only mildly interested in McCoy's motives. Instead, the knowledge that he could not remember the night before, that he had, in fact, lost all of the preceding day, was a nagging worry in his mind.

McCoy was relating an incident concerning a colleague he had met on his trip to Banoc-160, when a subtle suspicion about the doctor's unexpected presence began to vie for attention in Kirk's thoughts.

"Why did you say you decided to come here?" Kirk interrupted.

McCoy stopped talking and studied his friend thoughtfully before he answered. "Well, I figured you and Spock had enough of relaxin' in the sun and sand. Thought I'd better check to see that you didn't get too used to the life of leisure."

Kirk threw Spock a warning look not to interfere and spoke to McCoy. "So you just up and left the Enterprise -- came halfway across the galaxy to join us. Just like that."

"Not just like that. I had some leave time accrued, Jim." McCoy gauged Kirk's attitude.

"It was still kind of sudden, wasn't it, Doctor? You didn't even let us know you were coming, did you?" Kirk looked at Spock again. The Vulcan was about to speak but McCoy cut him off.

"I wanted to surprise you... "

"And you say you arrived last night?" Kirk asked.

"Hey, what is this, a third degree? What's wrong with wanting to join my friends for a little shore leave?"

"It hasn't been all a picnic," Kirk said, staring at his hands. McCoy leaned forward, studying the man across the table.

"Jim," he said quietly, "give it time. We'll work it out."

Kirk stood abruptly, his mood changing. McCoy knew before he spoke that he'd said the wrong thing. Anger flashed in the accusing hazel eyes as Kirk stared at the two concerned men still seated at the table.

"Who do you think you're kidding? I know you well enough -- both of you -- to see when you're being dishonest with me. Don't you think I've noticed you watching me all morning, Doctor, making a diagnosis in that medical brain of yours? Did Spock send for you, tell you I've been acting strange?" He faced the Vulcan. "What's the matter, Spock? Afraid you couldn't handle me by yourself any more?"

"Jim, please... " Spock began to rise; Kirk turned his attention back to McCoy.

"Did he tell you how he's been hovering over me for the past month, not letting me out of his sight, fixing my food, seeing to my needs, mothering me... smothering me! Did he tell you I'm getting sick of his interfering... "

Spock had crossed to Kirk's side. "Jim, you must calm yourself," he said, reaching out to take Kirk's elbow.

Kirk pulled away, swinging his arm backward and knocking over a cup of coffee on the table. "You see what I mean? Always telling me what to do, what not to do, suggesting in that deceptively soft way of his that he knows what's for my best. Well, I'm not a prisoner, I'm a free man now. I don't need anyone telling me what to do... "

McCoy faced Kirk. "Jim, stop this at once!" he commanded.

Kirk hesitated for a moment under the intense blue gaze, then jutted out his chin. "Go to hell -- or go back where you came from, but don't meddle in my affairs, McCoy!"

"You don't seem to be doing too well on your own," McCoy matched Kirk's determination.

"How would you know? Because of what *he's* told you, or because of what that analytical mind of yours thinks it sees?"

"Listen to yourself. Is this James Kirk talking?"

"You bet it is!"

"Yeah, I can see that," McCoy said. "Cool, in control, doing fine. I know... "

"You don't know anything," Kirk yelled. "You don't know *me* any more. You haven't seen the things I have, lived the..." he faltered.

"Let us help, Jim," McCoy urged. "We're your friends. Let's face this together."

Kirk slumped for a moment, his outburst taking its toll. "You don't understand, Bones. I'm not the same person any more. I'm different, changed... the James Kirk you knew is gone..."

"Then let us help you find him," Spock said quietly. "You can be that man again."

Compassion welled in Kirk for an instant, for the ever constant support of his friend. He'd abused Spock so often in recent weeks, lashing out at him to avoid bearing the blame himself.

"I wish to God that were true, Spock," he told him. "But it's too late."

"It is not too late," McCoy put in, "but you have to try, you need to want our help."

Unreasonably, resentment rose again in Kirk. "You don't know what I need."

"Do you?"

"Yes. I need to work it out in my own way, alone. I can handle it by myself."

"Can you?"

"I'm doing all right."

"Then tell me," McCoy pressed fearfully, "what happened to yesterday?"

A look of anguish crossed Kirk's countenance as he faced the blank wall of memory loss. The terror of not knowing consumed him.

... He was in a small bare room alone, seated on some foul-smelling straw-like substance piled in one corner. He had lost all track of time and he hadn't seen any of his men in what must have been days. He remembered being in the cell with Anderson and the others, then several guards had come in, dragged him out and brought him to this cell. Solitary. They held him while they injected something into his arm. That was all he remembered. When he awoke, he was alone, disoriented, having lost all sense of time. He vaguely remembered Ghi's face, glaring lights, but nothing else in his drugged state of amnesia. More time passed. Once a day a bowlful of what the Anthranians labeled food was shoved into his cell, but he saw no one. He resisted losing his awareness to sleep, shouting demands to see someone at the silent, closed door. Fatigue finally claimed him and his sleep was tormented by haunting flashes of light and Ghi's face, until he could no longer separate the dreams from reality.

At last his senses were shattered by the opening of his cell door and Kirk faced a smiling Ghi flanked by two guards.

"We are returning you to your men as a reward for your cooperation," Ghi told him with deceptive kindness. "Later, we will talk again and you will continue to cooperate as you did last night."

"You liar!" Kirk shouted. "I told you nothing."

Ghi was still smiling, almost sympathetically. "You don't remember? That is too bad, but not unusual. The mind often denies what it wishes to forget."

"There's nothing to remember. I've been confined to this stinking hole, drugged..."

"Whatever you choose to believe, but I know differently, and your men know differently. You have set the example. They are all anxious to talk to me now." Ghi motioned for the guards to take Kirk out. This time they were surprisingly gentle. Even when he resisted they took his arms firmly but with none of the cruelty he had come to expect.

Back at the community cell, he saw Marty Anderson's surprised face as the door was opened and Kirk was allowed to walk through on his own, rather than being shoved in, head-first, as was the usual return after a session with the Anties.

"Jim!" The men came toward him, their faces a mixture of relief and fear.

"You've been gone so long. We were afraid they'd killed you, even though they told us you were all right," Marty said.

"I'm fine," Kirk lied. "I was in solitary -- their idea of wearing on the nerves, I suppose, but they didn't hurt me." He sensed an uneasiness among the men. "What is it? Something?" he asked.

"Jim," Marty began, "they told us you had talked to them -- 'cooperated', they said. Gave information."

"It's a lie," Kirk protested. "Don't you see it's a trick to turn us all against each other? I told you. I was in solitary the whole time." He could not read the faces, tell if they believed him or not. He drew away from the group.

Did he believe it himself? Was Ghi making it up or... had he given them information? There were blank spots in his memory of the last few days. He couldn't remember...

Kirk gripped his head, moaning against the throbbing inside, and felt his knees begin to buckle. Strong arms caught him before he fell.

"I didn't talk... it was all a trick," he mumbled, confused. He felt himself being lifted and knew who it was. "Spock, I can't remember..."

"Take him into the bedroom," he heard McCoy say. "I'll give him something to ease the tension."

"No!" Kirk forced himself to answer. "No drugs." He caught McCoy's eyes as Spock laid him on his bed. "Please, Bones, no more drugs."

McCoy nodded and patted his shoulder. "Okay, you rest a little. When you feel like it, we'll talk again."

"Spock," Kirk gripped the Vulcan's hand. "Will you tell me what happened yesterday?"

"Yes, Jim. Later."

Kirk was awake but making no attempt to get up when McCoy came into his room a few hours later. McCoy observed the lethargic figure so unlike the vital captain he knew, but made no comment on Kirk's lack of ambition. Instead, "How's your headache?" he asked.

"It's better," Kirk answered, not bothering to look at the doctor. "Where's Spock?"

"He's checking on some things of mine that I left in town when I arrived yesterday. Hungry?" Kirk shook his head. McCoy offered a glass of juice he'd brought with him. "Well, at least drink this. I fortified it with vitamins to give you some nourishment."

Kirk sat up and took the glass. He sipped it, allowing the sweet liquid to quench his insatiable thirst. "Thanks, Bones." He handed the glass back and lay down.

"Sit up for awhile. Let's talk."

Kirk hesitated for a moment, then shrugged and sat at the side of the bed. Fear of what McCoy wanted from him vanished as he gazed at the compassionate features. He trusted McCoy as much as he trusted Spock. It had been one of the constants in all those terrible months. He reached over to squeeze McCoy's hand.

"Guess I gave you a hard time earlier. Sorry."

McCoy covered the hand with his own. "Well, maybe I pressed too hard. I should have been honest with you from the start, should have known you'd see through us. You were right about Spock asking me to come here. I had told him to let me know if he needed me, if he felt things weren't going well. He's worried about you."

"I know he is, Bones, but I can't help that. Maybe things haven't worked out as well as he -- we'd hoped, but I'm not a basket-case yet."

"Of course you're not. You went through a hell of an ordeal and it's not going to be easy to put it behind you. But, you know, Spock -- and I -- went through our own kind of hell those months, too. We didn't know what was happening to you and there was nothing we could do to help you. You were alone. We've got you back now; we're here and we *can* help you, if you'll let us. You don't have to be alone any more."

Kirk stood up, struggling to put his feelings into words, to explain to his friend why he couldn't accept what they had to offer. "Bones, I know you think I'm not coping very well, that I'm not able to handle this, but I am. Okay, I've had a few lapses of memory, lost a couple of days. I acknowledge that's a problem and I admit I'm bothered by it. But can't you see, I've got to think this through on my own. I've got to decide where I want to go from here. I've got to face what happened and deal with it in my own way. I can't share it with you or even with Spock because you have no comprehension, no way to understand what we went through."

"That's just it, Jim. You're not facing it. You're blanking out the parts you can't deal with. That's what's causing your periods of amnesia. Deliberately or unconsciously, your mind is refusing to face what's really bothering you. Look, you said we can't comprehend what you went through. Then make us understand. Get it out. Make us feel what you felt, see what you saw."

Kirk let out a breath. "You don't know what you're asking, Doctor. You think I would put you and Spock through that?"

"I think you can't do it alone. I think you need help, but you have to want it. Jim, all of us need help at some time. It's not wrong to admit that."

"Are you trying to play psychiatrist with me?"

"I'm not 'playing' anything."

"No, I guess you're not."

"Hey, I'm your friend, but I'm also a medical doctor. I don't know, maybe one will get in the way of the other, but I've taken care of your physical problems, patched you back together -- how many times? I've had to certify men fit or unfit for duty over and over in my career. I've never let personal feelings get in the way of my professional judgment, and you've relied on that judgment a thousand times. Why can't you trust me now?"

Kirk paced the room. "And in your professional opinion, James Kirk is falling apart. Unfit for duty?"

"You don't need me to tell you that."

Kirk stopped pacing and studied his feet. "Well, maybe that's not so important any more."

"What is important, Jim?"

"I don't know."

"Then, let's find out."

"It's not a question of trust, Bones," Kirk changed direction. "You know I think you're the best in your field. Call it a difference of opinion. You think I need help. I don't happen to agree with you."

"I'm the doctor, remember?"

"Doctor!" Kirk snapped. "That's just it. Doctor -- not God! You don't have all the answers."

"I don't have most of the answers. You're right, sometimes we medical people get to feeling like gods, making decisions that could affect lives without the certainty that those decisions are the correct ones. We think we're omnipotent. It's the same kind of affliction that sometimes affects starship captains."

"That's enough!"

"No, it's not nearly enough. Nothing we do is ever enough, but by God, whatever it is, whatever it takes to keep you from destroying yourself, I have to try because I care what happens to you."

"Why? What does it matter to any of us what happens? We live our lives on a star about to go nova. It can explode and all be taken away from us in an instant."

"Sure it can, but while we're here, we have to make it count for something. You count, you're important." McCoy rose and crossed to Kirk. "You have to believe in James Kirk, you have to try. That's what separates Man from the lower species."

Kirk's face contorted, his voice cracking. "I have *been* the lower species, Doctor."

The naked pain on Kirk's face caused McCoy to recoil, unable to answer. He dropped his head in anguish and turned away.

Kirk stared at him for a moment, then left the room.

The den was dark when Kirk entered and at first he didn't see the Vulcan seated by the desk. Kirk moved to sit down in one of the chairs when he heard Spock.

"Are you all right, Jim?" Kirk looked toward him.

"I didn't know you were in here. McCoy said you were checking on some things in town for him."

"I got back a short while ago. I heard you and the doctor talking and chose not to intrude."

"It's all right," Kirk said, sinking in the chair. "It's dark already," he observed.

"Shall I dial up the lights?"

"No, not yet. Did you get McCoy's things?"

"Yes."

"Spock, why didn't you tell me you'd sent for him?"

Spock sighed. "I thought you would object, if you knew."

"To seeing Bones?"

"No, to the fact that I felt you needed him."

"Do *you* think I need help?"

Spock came and sat in the chair next to Kirk's. "I think something is wrong, Jim, something that neither you nor I can correct. Perhaps McCoy, with us, can find out what it is."

Kirk leaned back in the chair and closed his eyes. "I don't think I have the strength. I'm so tired."

"Jim..." Kirk sensed that Spock's voice was edged with fear. There was an undercurrent of charged emotion, a desperation so atypical that Kirk chilled. "Don't give up," Spock continued raggedly. "If you haven't the strength, then lean on me." His voice became soft, as though he were speaking to himself. "It cannot end like this, without even trying... all those months of agony cannot have been for nothing."

Kirk reached out and touched Spock's face, the Vulcan's despair transmitting to his soul like a fresh wound.

"Spock, don't." Kirk felt tears well up for his friend's anguish, for the constant strength that now seemed closer to breaking than Kirk ever remembered. "Please, I can't see you hurt like this."

"Jim, I need..." The whisper trailed off.

"What?"

"You."

His tears spilled out then, and Kirk buried his face in his hands. "Oh God, Spock, what's happened? What the hell has happened to us?"

Spock drew him into his arms, pressing his face against the soft hair, feeling the trembling man sag against him.

"Help me, Spock."

Then McCoy was there, his voice gentle with calm reassurance. "We'll help you, Jim."

"Bones," Kirk fought back the fear, "I can't do it alone."

"You don't have to. Spock is here. I'm here. We'll do this together."

Spock held him tightly as if he were afraid if he let go he would lose the man clinging so desperately to sanity.

They had been talking for over three hours -- really talking -- and finally they agreed on a break. Spock brought in a tray with three steaming mugs of juniper tea. McCoy got up and stretched, taking two of the mugs from Spock and handing one to Kirk, who still sat on the couch.

"Here you are, Jim. Watch it, it's hot."

Kirk took the cup but his grip was unsteady; some of the liquid splashed on his hand.

"Ouch!"

"I told you to be careful," McCoy scolded, reaching to retrieve the cup. Kirk held on.

"Never mind, I have it."

"Let me see your hand. Did you burn it?"

"It's nothing."

Spock came over. "Jim," he began.

"I said it was nothing!" Kirk snapped. His nerves were beginning to wear thin again. At first, he had talked peacefully, describing with a seeming calmness some of the things that had been happening since he had come to the starbase. McCoy kept the questions general, careful not to press when Kirk seemed reluctant to go into details. Mostly, the Captain had seemed anxious to cooperate, talking freely with an almost clinical detachment about why certain things were happening. He expressed a curiosity about the day before, but when neither Spock nor McCoy elaborated on what had taken place, he didn't insist -- almost as if he were afraid to have them tell him what he couldn't remember. McCoy directed the questioning, knowing they were skirting the important issues, but he wanted to build up Kirk's confidence in talking, putting him at ease in expressing what came to his mind.

It seemed to be working. Kirk continued to express his concern over his recent actions, the black-outs, the recurrent nightmares that drained his strength, his uncharacteristic clumsiness. Yet when McCoy would try to be specific, Kirk would become agitated and change the conversation.

As they relaxed and finished the tea, Kirk grew calmer. At last McCoy began to question him again, bringing up Kirk's memory loss of the previous day and night. Since it indicated a prolonged period of disorientation, McCoy suspected it might have been triggered by something close to the heart of the problem.

"Jim, what's the last thing you remember before you woke this morning?"

"I don't know, maybe going to bed the night before."

"Only it wasn't the night before. It was two nights ago -- before I arrived. Do you remember that?"

"Yes, I guess so. I don't remember yesterday at all."

"Did you dream?"

"Maybe. You know I've been having a lot of dreams lately."

"About the camp?"

"I guess so."

"What did you dream about the camp?"

"I don't remember."

"Do you dream about other things beside what happened at the camp?"

Kirk grinned. "Sure, Doctor. Don't most men?"

McCoy returned the grin but his voice was serious. "Do you dream about women, Jim?"

The smile faded from Kirk's face. "Never mind, drop it."

"You brought it up."

"I said drop it. Let's talk about something else."

McCoy decided to let him have his way. "Okay, but you still haven't answered my question."

"What? Oh, do I dream about other things?" Kirk thought. "No, I don't think so."

"What about the ship? Do you ever dream about the Enterprise?"

A fragment of memory flashed into Kirk's consciousness. "Yeah... yeah, I guess... something..." he struggled for the elusive picture.

"Did you dream about the Enterprise yesterday?"

Kirk was becoming nervous. "I... I was on shore leave. We had just transported a lot of important passengers. Spock... your father..." he turned to the Vulcan questioningly, then back to McCoy. "But that wasn't yesterday, was it? I've been here all the time."

"Easy, Jim," McCoy cautioned softly. "When I arrived yesterday, you had disappeared. Spock didn't know where you'd gone and we spent most of the day looking for you." He ignored a worried look from Spock and went on, choosing his words carefully. "When we found you, you were... disoriented. You talked about the ship, seemed to think we'd just completed a mission. Do you remember any of it?"

Kirk shook his head. "I saw you yesterday?"

"Yes, last evening."

Kirk rose and paced the room, frowning, trying to remember. "Bones, this is impossible. I was gone a whole day and I can't remember. It's all a blank."

"It happens, Jim, but what we're trying to find out is what triggered it, what you were thinking when you left the house."

"I don't know. Where did you find me?"

"In a bar."

Kirk let out a breath. "Drinking?"

"Yes."

Kirk looked over at Spock and saw the pain on the quiet Vulcan features. "Guess I gave you a hard time, huh?"

"No, Jim," Spock assured. "You were quite agreeable."

Kirk grinned fondly at the supportive reply. Spock would not have complained if they'd had to subdue him forcibly. He walked over to the window and stood glaring at the sea and the stars. A hand touched his shoulder.

"We'll find the answers," McCoy's voice was confident.

Kirk turned, pleading. "Bones, what's the meaning of all this --" he flung his arms, "-- this vastness? Universes go on and wars are fought and won and in all of it, we're so insignificant."

McCoy started to answer, but Kirk stopped him. "No -- you said once that there's only one of each of us... you said, 'don't destroy the one named Kirk.' But, Bones, he doesn't exist any longer. God, what's left of him..."

"... is still worth fighting for," McCoy finished.

"I'm falling apart."

"Then we'll put you back together."

"Can you?"

"Yes, *we* can."

"How do you know?"

"Because it's what you want."

"I don't know that."

"Yes, you do. You won't admit it because it's easier to give in, to not have to fight back. Frankly, I'm surprised at you. You never were one to admit defeat, to give up."

"That just shows how little you really know about me. I *have been* defeated, I *have* given up, I... " Kirk stopped and walked away, his shield against revealing too much coming back into place. "I don't want to talk about it any more." He crossed the room and sat opposite Spock, avoiding those somber brown eyes watching him. The three men were silent, yet Kirk sensed an uneasiness, as though they were waiting for him to say something.

"How long are you going to be able to stay here, Bones?"

McCoy suddenly crossed the room and stood above his chair, staring down at him with angry determination. "Stop it, Jim! Don't you see what you're doing, changing the subject, avoiding the issue? You've got to get it out, talk about it!"

"Drop it, Doctor. I've had enough." Kirk's voice was less forceful than McCoy's.

"Fine. Shall I go back and tell the crew of the Enterprise to just forget about any hope of seeing James Kirk again? Shall I tell them they better get used to a new captain, because the one they waited for, prayed for all those months doesn't give a damn what happens to them?"

"You son-of-a-bitch."

"Well, do you care, Jim? Does the Enterprise matter to you at all now?" McCoy hammered.

The Enterprise, sleek and silver... his... 'I'll never lose you.'

He saw Spock rise; something in the Vulcan's face... fury.

"Leave him alone, Doctor." The voice carried a warning.

At my side... always... here... in the dark prison of Anthrania... on the bridge of the Enterprise...

McCoy's question rang in his ears. "It matters," he whispered. "I care what happens to the Enterprise, her crew... my crew."

"Do you want to go back?" McCoy's voice was quiet, loving.

Kirk nodded.

"Then you will." The reassurance, the gentleness was there. Kirk realized the blue eyes were misted. He did want to go back, did want to command. For this man's sake, for Spock's, for that crew with all their loyalty, but mostly for himself. He knew that now. McCoy had made him say it. He smiled.

"You may not be so anxious when I start cracking down on the discipline you've all been relaxing in my absence. I expect one hundred per cent."

"We'll take our chances," McCoy grinned, the tension relieved.

"I'll see how soft you've all gotten when I get back," Kirk teased. *When I get back, not if.* He tested the idea for the first time in months. It fit, he knew it now. He wanted to command.

The three Enterprise men sat together, talking for the rest of the evening, a relaxed camaraderie almost like old times, if one could forget the purpose for being on the planet. It was still early when McCoy began recognizing signs of fatigue in all of them and suggested

they call it a night. There was a lot of hard work ahead for the three in the next few weeks. Kirk had to be ready for Starfleet's evaluation and the time seemed all too short in which to accomplish his acceptance of what had happened.

McCoy had been shaken by the man he had found in the bar -- alone and out of touch with reality -- the night before. Even Spock's detailed descriptions had not prepared him for the helplessness he felt when he actually came face to face with the friend for whom they both cared so much. The stark realization of what Jim and Spock must have been going through these past weeks overwhelmed him. He had forced a confidence and bravado for his friends' sake that he certainly didn't feel. Yet if he were unable to help Jim, could he trust a stranger, a detached psychiatrist, to be sensitive to the intricate workings of the mind that drove a man like Kirk?

Kirk had said repeatedly that McCoy no longer knew him. Perhaps that was more true than either of them dared to admit. Perhaps the experience on Anthrania had made changes in the basic psyche of James Kirk. Spock loved Kirk with a fierce protectiveness, yet McCoy knew that the Vulcan's reaction to the imprisonment would have been vastly different than that of a human. McCoy could understand in ways that Spock could not what physical pain and degradation could do to one who was not trained in Vulcan forms of mental control. But could anyone truly understand someone else? Humans were often as alien to each other as they were to other races.

James Kirk had command training to give him the control he needed in crises that would have broken the emotional doctor, but not even that kind of background could have prepared him for the reality of the Anthranian prison.

McCoy recalled the horror he had felt when he had seen the evidence of physical abuse on Kirk's body when his captain had first been returned to the Enterprise. It was a shock that only *his* training as a physician had enabled him to control.

Kirk had tried to control as a Vulcan might, but he hadn't the training or ability. He was human. Now, he was exhibiting not control, but a complete block against remembering and accepting the worst truths about what had happened. They had made progress tonight; at least Kirk had admitted the need for help. Yet McCoy would have to do more, make him admit to the feelings he attempted to hide. The doctor wondered if he had the strength to put Kirk through the ordeal he knew was necessary. He wanted to protect Kirk, keep him safe, but the way he was now, he was neither happy nor safe. He knew that the kind of help he would put Kirk through would be nearly as bad as the original tortuous experience. It had to be done. McCoy frowned, knowing that he had Kirk's trust, yet realizing that his friend didn't know what the doctor would have to do to him in order to give him the help he needed.

- 3 -

The method of McCoy's help began to take on a pattern, with the doctor in the role of inquisitor, friend, and often the butt of Kirk's reluctant admissions. The two men engaged in long hours of conversation, with McCoy sometimes gently guiding, sometimes insistently probing, while Spock, at the doctor's direction, would deliberately absent himself from the sessions. They had discussed the advisability of the Vulcan's presence and McCoy felt that Kirk would respond better to one person at a time. Spock conceded to McCoy's expertise and with some trepidation agreed to do it his way.

Early one afternoon several days after the therapy had begun, Kirk and McCoy were once more in the house alone. McCoy took up residence at the desk in the den, while Kirk sat on the edge of the couch and grinned.

"Well, Doctor, should I lie back, close my eyes and tell you of my horrible childhood?"

McCoy laughed. "You had a perfectly normal, pampered childhood, but you might find talking

a little easier if you weren't perched there all tensed up like a caged Rhinecat."

Kirk complied, stretched out on the couch and closed his eyes. "All right, Bones, fire away... Let's see, I once harbored hate feelings toward my mother when I was six years old because she wouldn't let me go to a traveling light show with my brother Sam and his friends..."

"Hmmm... that could have some deep, psychological significance," McCoy went along with the game.

Kirk sat up abruptly. "And then there was the time I ran away from home and hid out for four hours because my teacher was going to call my parents to tell them I was fighting during recess."

"Yes, the 'reluctance-to-face-responsibility' syndrome... "

"And another time, I... "

"Enough," McCoy interrupted. "All right, we've established that you were an average, nasty little boy who grew up to be a somewhat above average starship captain."

Kirk frowned, his cheerful mood subsiding. "This is getting us nowhere...!"

"Of course not, if you're going to continue to play games all afternoon."

"What do you want to hear? Some more blood-curdling horror stories about the everyday life of a prisoner on Anthrania?"

"That is what we're here to talk about."

"Bones, I can't talk about it all the time. I have to get away from it sometimes," Kirk pleaded.

McCoy sighed. "Okay. Then what *do* you want to talk about? And don't tell me the awful pranks you pulled as a kid."

Kirk relaxed, grinning under McCoy's exasperated scowl. "You know, you can be one hell of a bore at times."

"Oh, no, you don't. We're not here to discuss my problems, either."

"You have a few," Kirk teased.

"No doubt. I'll debate that with you sometime, but right now, our job is to get to the root of yours."

"That's what I love about you, McCoy. You're so damned single-minded."

"Dedicated is the word." McCoy was smug.

"Bullshit. You're a nasty, probing, meddling, interfering old goat."

"Yes, Captain."

Kirk's eyes sparkled with affection. "God, I'm glad you haven't changed, Bones. I guess I was afraid that maybe..."

"Maybe what?"

"I don't know, all that time away, everything was so... different. I kept thinking about... home, all the things I knew. I was afraid that maybe when I came back... well, it didn't seem that things could still be going on as usual, that people would still be the same. You know, there was no touch with familiarity... only memories to rely on, and after a while I wondered if I was even remembering correctly or if my mind was recalling only what I wanted it to."

"The human psyche has a tendency to block out unpleasant memories and remember only good things. Man's been doing that since before recorded history. That's why each generation

expounds on 'the good old days'."

"I know that, Bones. Is that what I'm doing with Anthrania?"

"In a sense, but in this case it's a little different. There isn't very much good to remember about that ordeal. Your consciousness is putting up a defense mechanism, blocking out the worst parts. While you were on Anthrania you had the good memories of the past to sustain you, give you something to hold on to, fight for."

"That's true. There were some times when it was all that kept me going. Sometimes it would get so... bad, that I couldn't cope and I'd think about the Enterprise or you and Spock, and it was a kind of... escape from there. I couldn't really escape -- physically, but they couldn't control my thoughts all of the time."

"Did they try to control your thinking?"

Kirk nodded. "Yes. Not with drugs or sophisticated machines like the Mindsifter. They used trickery... and torture to confuse us, make us think things were not as they seemed."

"So you would retreat mentally into your memories and detach yourself from what was happening," McCoy clarified. "It's one of the things that helped you survive the ten months."

"It wasn't always possible to do that, though," Kirk told him. "After a while, Ghi caught on to it and found ways to keep our minds focused on the present and what was happening. Then there was no escape."

"What ways?" McCoy asked. Kirk paused, not comprehending, so McCoy repeated his question. "What ways did he find to keep you from escaping in your thoughts?" The doctor forced himself to be calm, relaxed, while his heart protested against hearing what atrocities had been inflicted upon his friend.

Kirk could talk about it, had schooled himself through the tapes and debriefing to report in a detached manner. "Torture, mostly." His voice was informative, matter-of-fact. "... Inflicting pain so excruciating that it drove all thoughts out of our heads. Later, they learned to use psychological torture as well -- separating us, leading us to expect physical pain then making us wait for it. The Anties were primitives, barbarians by our standards, but they learned fast."

"How did you feel about them?" McCoy asked.

"Who? The Anties?"

McCoy nodded.

"Oh, we were great buddies," Kirk said sarcastically. "How in the hell do you think I felt about them? I despised them."

"All of them -- all the guards?"

"Yes."

"They showed no compassion, no acts of caring, no kindness?"

"None. What do you think it was, Bones -- a vacation resort?"

"No, of course not. I was just wondering if any of them in all the ten months ever had any feelings about what they were doing."

"Well, if they did, they never let us see it."

"Yet they learned to understand you, if only to find your weaknesses. That shows a degree of intelligence and comprehension on their part. We have found that usually when one race learns to understand another, there is a certain amount of ... affiliation between them."

"There was no affiliation between the Anties and ourselves. If they felt anything, it was pleasure. The Anties enjoyed our suffering."

"How do you know that?"

A memory of evil, leering faces flashed before Kirk... the Anties making bets on how much pain could be tolerated, who would be the first to break... Compassion? No, there was none of that. Kirk remembered the rough handling of battered bodies, food being thrust at a man too weak to feed himself, and water to ease a parched throat placed just out of reach when each movement toward the treasured liquid was an experience of contrived agony.

All the Anthranians were cold, detached, cruel -- even the medics who were there to see that the prisoners survived as long as Ghi wanted them to. They would take no chances of losing a valuable commodity unless it suited their purpose. Even in their hospital, even when they were saving a life, they showed no caring, no humanity. The prisoners were just an item of possession, to save or not as Ghi decreed. And if in their lack of concern they blundered, a human life could be counted as lost while the Anthranians marked it up as experience.

... The morning air was thick with a smoky haze, cold and damp. It permeated the confines of the cell, awakening the groggy prisoners with its now-familiar stench. They lay on their individual pallets, shoved into groups of twos and threes for additional warmth, and tried to ignore the coming of dawn.

Kirk moved his limbs restlessly, still reluctant to completely relinquish the safety of sleep. Some mornings, in this twilight stage between two levels of consciousness, he could almost convince himself that this was all a nightmare, that he'd wake up in his cabin on the Enterprise, walk up to the bridge, assume his post and smile a friendly greeting to his crew. It was almost there for him this morning... Bones entered the bridge and assumed his favorite spot beside the command chair. Something tugged at the back of Kirk's mind, something he'd wanted to ask McCoy... Something was wrong. 'Bones, I think I need...' Kirk's semi-conscious mind wrestled with the matter for a moment.

Harsh, jarring reality clanged with the coming of an Anthranian guard, banging his stick along the bars of the cell, jolting him fully awake. Kirk groaned and rolled over on his side, away from Anderson who was slowly sitting up. The fantasy slipped away, forgotten as though it had never existed, replaced by the desolate truth that for the past two months, each day in this place, this constant battle for survival was the only reality.

Still, the persistent intuition remained, a nagging worry that teased the periphery of his consciousness, even in this place and time. With a great effort, he managed to sit up, while others around him were all rising, going through their typical morning motions, preparing themselves for the day ahead.

"Jim, are you all right?" The concerned voice seemed disembodied.

"Mmnh...?" Kirk struggled to clear his mind, looked up to identify Anderson standing over him. "Yeah... 'm okay," he mumbled, rubbing his eyes with his knuckles. Yet, suddenly, Kirk knew he wasn't all right, knew what his vague uneasiness had signified. His throat hurt to swallow, he ached more than usual, and his eyes burned and stung. He was ill.

One of their major fears from the very beginning had been the danger of illness or infection. The alien atmosphere held bacteria totally foreign to their systems and they had no immunity. The broad-spectrum antibiotics they had been given before the mission had been expected to last only two weeks. They must be defenseless against any number of Anthranian germs, and from what they had witnessed of the enemy's medical technology, knew they could expect little help from that area if they became sick.

Now, it appeared that what they dreaded had occurred. Kirk knew that one infectious disease could wipe out all of them in a matter of days. The chilling thought managed to clarify his thinking.

"Marty... listen. Keep the others away from me. I may have picked up a germ -- feels like an influenza-type strain right now -- no telling what it could be..." Kirk spoke urgently, keeping his voice low.

"Oh God." Anderson stopped beside him, tested Kirk's forehead with his palm. "You're hot

as Vulcan, Jim. What should I do? Tell the Anties? They might know what it is, give you something..." Anderson met Kirk's fever-bright gaze, both men silently completing the thought. The Anthranians' medicine could just as easily kill as cure.

Kirk considered his alternatives. The others might be safer if he were removed from the cell, yet Kirk disliked facing the prospect of relinquishing his treatment to the Anties. Yet he wasn't anxious to return to the prison infirmary. His experience there when they had awkwardly set his broken leg made the prospect far from appealing.

Kirk's head was throbbing too badly to answer. Anderson settled the issue by pushing him back to the pallet.

"Just lie down... maybe it'll pass," he ventured. "Let's wait."

Kirk was in no condition to belabor the point. Gradually, he felt himself drifting off to sleep again.

As the day wore on, it became obvious that Kirk was getting worse. It took until after lunch for the Anthranians to realize something was wrong. Once the guards' curious snooping ascertained the truth, reaction was swift. Minutes later a squad returned and, backing the others against the wall, they lifted Kirk to a litter and sped him to the prison infirmary.

By then, Kirk was feeling too sick to even care what they did. His fever had risen, he was weak, constant nausea tore at his stomach, and as they deposited him on a less than sanitary bed, he was overcome with a bitter desire to laugh at the irony of the situation. The ignominious defeat -- the perverted justice -- to be conquered at last by so familiar an enemy as this, after all he had endured. Laughter turned to sobs, a dry moaning. Then, wearily, he lapsed into quiet. There was no point in giving his emotions their unsatisfying release. It helped nothing.

The infirmary was in a small, dirty section of the prison, set apart from the main building by one access tunnel. There were several sickrooms, another area which passed for a laboratory, office space for a small staff of personnel. It was a cold, cheerless place with a heavy, overwhelming air of death and decay.

Soon after his arrival, Kirk was awakened and examined by an indifferent physician who spoke no Standard. He gestured broadly to get Kirk to comply with his demands, poking and prodding roughly with skinny fingers. He was, Kirk observed, the skinniest Anthranian he'd met. Kirk, under no restraints, momentarily debated trying to overpower him and seek escape. Yet, regardless of the doctor's frail appearance, Kirk was still the weaker and knew such a move would be futile. In his present condition, he wouldn't get very far.

After a final appraisal, the doctor left, and for hours Kirk saw no one. He lay, tossing restlessly, unable to sleep yet too tired to leave his bed. His temperature elevated and then he did sleep, a light-headed delirium which gave him no true rest.

Several times as the disease ran its course, Kirk saw Ghi, conferring with the doctor or standing by the bed checking the written reports of his condition. In some of his more lucid moments, Kirk tried to communicate with him, needing to hear the sound of another voice as much as anything. For most of the time, Kirk was cast adrift, lost in this alien place, away from any familiar touch of comfort, gentleness or caring.

Long hours were spent in a fantasy which Kirk was unable to shove away. He was too weak for denial, too sick to fully know the difference between reality and imagination. He would call for McCoy, hear McCoy answer, know that McCoy was urging him to fight, to will himself to live. On Anthrania, the simple, human touch was unknown, yet it lived in Kirk's subconscious, provided a buffer to the unwholesome present, kept him from giving up.

Once, Ghi reluctantly admitted that two others were infected -- Harvey Landers and Dennis Holt. They were quartered in another sickroom. Ghi smugly assured Kirk that the doctor was highly qualified and that they were expecting to isolate the antitoxin any time, now.

For nearly six days, Kirk's whole existence focused on this new battle for survival. Alone, he struggled through days and nights of nausea, fever and cold sweats, tossing in and out of reality. He endured the rough ministrations of the medical staff who infrequently came to cleanse

him or to take blood samples or give an injection of unknown medicine. A painful needle was permanently inserted into his thigh, a primitive form of IV, he assumed. In his delirium, though, he kept knocking it out, and they would come back and scream at him, waving the tube at him to make it understood that he was inconveniencing them. Finally they tied his leg to the bed, increasing his discomfort.

Silently, Kirk would slip into his own world where friends and members of his family abided with calm and comfort. His mother, Sam, McCoy, Spock... familiar, pleasant. Some visions were stranger -- he saw Gem, dying from his agony... the huge rock-bulk of the Mother Horta, who took him as one of her children in a surrealistic scene of compassion. At different times, various women whom he had known and for whom he had cared sat beside him -- Edith, Miramane with her folk medicine, Ruth, Areel... they appeared briefly, disappeared with the coming of consciousness.

Kirk babbled, raved, swore at anyone who came near him. He cursed at Ghi, even when the Anthranian told him that the doctors had found the cure.

It turned out to be true. For once, Ghi was not lying to him. After a while, the doctor began administering another drug through the IV, and giving a purple syrup. Gradually, Kirk's mind began to clear, his temperature dropped and he realized that he was going to live, after all.

In the days which followed, Kirk slowly regained his strength. He remained in the infirmary, guarded now and restrained, at times, by ropes. He found the precautions amusing because there was still no way he could have fought his way out. It was an effort merely to leave his bed.

Ghi, who had been conspicuously absent since the cure had been found, finally paid Kirk a visit just before he was to be released. The Anthranian looked more dour than usual, as though he were irritated with someone or something.

"Your recovery is now complete?" he asked.

"Not entirely," Kirk hedged, for it was easier to remain here than return to the interrogations and the rest of the tortures.

"Tomorrow you go back -- the doctor says you are complete."

Kirk sighed. He had expected as much. "I see. Your doctor doesn't know very much, does he?"

Ghi bristled. "He found the medicine to cure you," he reminded.

"What of the others?" Kirk asked, speaking what had been foremost in his mind all along. "You told me two others were ill..."

Ghi regarded him steadily. "One lives. One gave his life for you."

Grief and despair filled Kirk, followed by dread as Ghi's dispassionate voice continued.

"The man Holt -- he is dead, unfortunately. We know so little about you humans. When the drug was found which would counteract the disease, it was administered first to Holt. It proved to be too strong for him."

"The drug... KILLED him?" Kirk was horrified. "You mean it wasn't tested first, you didn't check..."

"It was tested," Ghi maintained. "On Holt."

"Oh, my God." Kirk turned away, unable to look on the impassive face. "You don't test medicine on humans without... You... oh, damn you," he groaned.

"It was a reasonable error," Ghi explained. "After Holt's reaction, we were able to adjust the formula and administer it to you and Landers. Your own top-shape is proof of our skill and knowledge, yes?"

"Damn your primitive skill!" Kirk exploded. "You sadistic, bumbling fools! A man is DEAD

because of your mistake! And it makes no difference... it doesn't matter... "

Ghi drew back as if startled. His eyes grew hard. "Careful, Captain Kirk. You give me anger."

Ghi's indifference was infuriating; Kirk was past caution. "To hell with your anger! You don't play with my men like experimental animals! Holt died and he didn't have to! If you'd observed the barest minimum of safety, of scientific principle -- "

Ghi slapped Kirk across the mouth with the palm of his hand. "Enough! We are Anthranian. We do Anthranian way. You will learn that, Captain. Or you will die," he pronounced harshly. Then he stalked away, leaving Kirk alone with his grief and rage.

Now, the triumph over sickness paled, tinged by the blood of the man who had died so that he might live. Kirk futilely strained against the ropes binding him to the bed. Three of his crew, dead. Three good men, Starfleet's elite choice. Michaelson and Reed -- and now, Dennis Holt, youngest of them, a precocious lieutenant from the Starship Hornet, weapons specialist and assistant navigator, a bright young man with a brilliant future... gone, killed by some lunatic Anthranian physician who didn't bother with lab tests before giving a new drug.

Kirk wondered how much more was in store for them, how long before they were released. Anguish consumed him, a fierce hatred toward Ghi and his whole way of life...

"I did learn how much was in store for us," Kirk was saying, half to himself, lost in the memory. "Later, when we had been there longer, we learned..." He buried his face in his hands. "Oh, Bones..."

McCoy felt his blood turn cold listening to the anguish of a friend who had been sick, had needed him, knowing he hadn't been there. He bristled at the knowledge of medicine practiced in such primitive, unsanitary, unthinking ways, men calling themselves doctors, stumbling through treatment and diagnosis, human beings used for experiments... and Kirk, an unwilling, defenseless victim suffering as much over the agony of young Holt's needless death as from the disease that consumed his body. It was a waste, an affront to everything McCoy held sacred, life and death in the hands of unskilled, inhumane butchers. And it was also a good psychological ploy, to make Kirk feel guilty and further demoralize him. Maybe the Anthranians were more skillful than they thought.

McCoy forced himself to concentrate on the man who had lived through it. He could not allow himself to succumb to the anger that welled in Kirk; he must remain detached, professional for his sake.

Rivulets of sweat cascaded down Kirk's face, and he leaned forward, sat hunched on the edge of the couch, a study in tension. McCoy walked over and began kneading the muscles at the back of Kirk's neck.

"All right, breathe deep," he instructed. "Relax a minute."

"Those monsters," Kirk was still talking, consumed by a hatred forced to surface again with the telling of the incident. "Dirty, unfeeling..."

"Jim, I said relax. Let it go," McCoy warned. He was terrified of the expression he saw. James Kirk, the man who had not been able to destroy a Gorn, even though provoked, now wore the look of a trapped, vicious animal. The doctor knew that at that moment Kirk could have easily murdered without a second thought.

Kirk stood, whirling to face McCoy. "I don't want to relax, Doctor," he snarled. "You wanted to hear it. What's the matter -- no stomach for it?" The fury inside directed its focus on McCoy. "I don't want to forget for even one moment what they were, what they did..."

"And what will that do to you?" McCoy challenged. "Will the hatred make a better man of you?"

"It doesn't matter about... me. I'll manage. You... you wanted to know... to feel... what they were like. Well, it wasn't a clean, antiseptic lawn party with mint julips and company manners. You... wouldn't have survived their existence."

McCoy's blue eyes flashed angrily. "Wouldn't I have, Captain?"

Kirk took a breath, aware that he hadn't meant to lash out at McCoy, yet unwilling to back down. "Never mind," he said. "It's academic. You weren't there."

"No, it's not academic," McCoy pressed. "Tell me, is that what you think of me? That I haven't the guts, the courage to stand up to suffering? You think I'd crumble under pressure? That James Kirk could survive but Leonard McCoy would fall apart?"

"Oh, damn, Bones, I said forget it." Kirk was annoyed.

"Yeah, it's always easier to say 'never mind, forget it' when you don't want to talk about it, isn't it? Well, you made some rather serious accusations, Captain, and I just want to know what it is you really think about your Chief Medical Officer."

"Look, I tried to spare you this," Kirk's voice went on, calmer. "I told you it wasn't pretty, but you keep pressing for more, you keep wanting all the details, all the damned, gruesome atrocities. Why? Why is it necessary for you to hear all that? Why do you insist that I tell you everything that happened? What good will it do?"

McCoy walked over to the window, hating himself for becoming angry, for hurting the man he was trying to help. "I don't know," he said at last. "Maybe no good. Sometimes I'm not even sure what we're looking for. But... something, Jim. We might hit on something. To stop the nightmares, to help..." He shrugged, looking for words to explain why the therapy was necessary, why he had to continue to hurt. "Try to understand. There are parts of the experience on Anthrania that you cannot or will not face. As long as they are blocked, we can't find out what it is about them that's upsetting you so, and unless we find the reason, understand it and cope with it, you will continue to have black-outs, memory loss, all the other symptoms you've been experiencing."

Kirk was unconvinced. "Bones, I've given reports to Starfleet, I've been over it with you and Spock. I've told and retold everything that happened. I'm not hiding anything."

"Perhaps not deliberately or consciously..."

"Not even subconsciously."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes!"

"All right." McCoy changed directions. "Then let's talk about your confession. What happened."

Kirk's expression suddenly turned wild, terror filled his eyes and he recoiled visibly. Anger returned. "Damn it, McCoy! Leave me alone! You sadistic son-of-a-bitch! What kind of tricks are you trying to pull?"

McCoy had seen this reaction, though less violent, every time he had mentioned the confession during their talks. He refused to be intimidated or riled by Kirk's words again. "No tricks. Just plain answers to plain questions."

"I will not answer any more of your questions. You can't force me!" Kirk's control was gone. "I don't care what you do. I will not tell you anything! I am a Starfleet officer... I've been trained to resist your probing..."

"All right," McCoy had to calm him. "All right. No more questions." He took Kirk's arms "No more questions now, Jim."

Shadows of approaching evening cast their tinted spell over the cozy room. In a few moments the lights would begin to compensate for the growing dusk, but for now, all was tranquil. Kirk

sat on the floor with his knees drawn up, his back resting against a padded stool. He could hear McCoy in the kitchen, water running, the soft chugging of the food processors. A door opened and closed again; he heard muffled voices. Spock had returned. Kirk's pulse quickened, but he made no attempt to rise or to stir from his self-imposed lethargy. He felt, rather than saw, the Vulcan enter the room, sensed him turn to the light panel.

"Don't." It was a harsh croak. Kirk cleared his throat.

Silently, Spock crossed and sat on the hassock behind him. "Are you all right?"

No. I'm coming apart and McCoy is a tyrant and... "Sure," he answered flippantly. "Why shouldn't I be?"

"Jim, don't -- "

"I'm sorry." Contrite, Kirk turned his head to meet Spock's eyes. "It's been an unpleasant afternoon."

"Can I help?"

"McCoy should have been on Anthranian. He would have made a great assistant to Ghi," Kirk complained bitterly.

"The doctor can be quite... persistent at times," Spock agreed. "What did you talk about?"

Kirk shifted restlessly, flattening his legs on the floor. "Anthranian -- what else? I don't want to talk about it now."

"All right," Spock soothed. "No questions."

"I *know* I've got to discuss it with him, I even know what he wants me to say most of the time," Kirk went on despite his own request. "But it disturbs me to relive it, to examine what it all meant, how it's affected me as a person."

"You've said how much you have changed," Spock prompted. Kirk hesitated, considering.

"Well, perhaps not *so* much. I mean," he rushed on, grappling with the idea, "in certain areas I feel different. But there are constants, too."

"Such as?"

"You. The desire to command the Enterprise. I don't know..." he faltered, turning his face toward the window. Even so small an admission had been exhausting. Bones had asked him the same questions the other day and he had been unable to respond. Yet something in the Vulcan's quiet approach made him want to face that challenge, brave the unspeakable.

"Jim? Spock?" McCoy stood in the doorway. "Anybody in here hungry?"

"No," Kirk answered crisply. "You two go ahead." Restless, Kirk paced to the window.

McCoy crossed the room to stand beside him. "Well, we'll wait, then."

Kirk's anger flared. "Why can't you leave me alone for five minutes? I'm surprised you allow me the use of the bathroom unescorted!"

"I'm not the enemy, Jim. I'm trying to help you," McCoy pleaded.

Kirk wilted. "I know that. I'm beginning to sound paranoid, saying things, making accusations I don't mean." He caught McCoy's eyes and held them with a plea for understanding. McCoy returned the gaze and patted Kirk's arm.

"I guess we all say things in anger that we don't believe, Captain."

Spock's voice drifted over from the other side of the room. "After ten months of constant interrogation, you're naturally suspect of any inquisition, regardless of how it's done or who

does it."

"Ghi never made any sense... well, not most of the time, and especially not at first. He got better as he learned more about us."

"You hate him, don't you?" McCoy asked softly.

"I could have killed him, Bones. He made me believe in killing."

"Could you, now?"

"What...?"

"If Ghi were here right this minute, would you kill him?"

"Yes." Kirk's voice was bitter. He looked at the sea, his eyes gleaming. "I'd enjoy it."

"How would you do it? What would you do?" McCoy encouraged.

Kirk thought about it and came up against a solid blank wall. "I don't know. He should be punished, though."

"Yes, he should," McCoy agreed. "You could inflict upon him the same cruelties which he employed -- "

"No." Kirk rubbed a hand over his eyes. "I couldn't do that to anyone, not even him."

"An eye for an eye," McCoy argued. "From all I've heard, he deserves to suffer."

"Bones!" Kirk was amazed. "That's not our way. We're not like the Anties. That was part of our problem. Our minds don't work like theirs. We can't be... barbarians."

"You said you could kill him," McCoy pointed out.

"I was ready to -- would have -- back there... "

"And I don't blame you. I would, too."

"You're a doctor. You're supposed to save lives, not take them."

McCoy shrugged. "Evil must be destroyed."

Kirk grinned. "Maybe you would have survived Anthrania, Doctor." Then he turned thoughtful. "How many times have we discovered that what we thought of as evil was merely a concept foreign to our nature? A mother defending her young, an alien who believes he's been provoked, a misguided scientist trying to benefit another race... "

"Are you defending Ghi?" McCoy challenged.

"No! But he was a soldier. It was a job he was doing. The fact that he enjoyed his work made him utterly contemptible, but he was a part of a society which did not consider him evil. The society was misguided..." Kirk held his head between his hands and paced the room. "God, what am I saying?" he moaned. "I hate him and I want him to pay..."

Abruptly he stopped. He saw Spock, still seated on the footstool, anxious brown eyes following him. Kirk looked away, uncomfortable.

"Anyway, it's irrelevant. I don't have the chance. I'm no longer a prisoner. He's not a threat."

"Revenge. Justice," McCoy insisted. "Now."

"No! I'm not a barbarian. I'm a man. There's no point to it, not any more."

Spock stood and came beside him. "Another of your 'constants', Jim?" he asked softly.

Kirk met his eyes this time, drawing himself up straight. "It would seem so." He turned to McCoy, intent. "Don't you see, Bones? I can't feel compassion, not yet, but I know I would be fair and sane about it. That's me. I can't change what I am."

" 'Man has said, I will not kill... today,' " McCoy quoted, smiling. "So there are certain things which do not change."

Spock perceived the weary expression on Kirk's face and interposed. "Perhaps it would be best if we took our meal now," he suggested softly. McCoy caught the Vulcan's eyes.

"Good idea, Spock."

- 4 -

"Bones, I've been thinking about what I said last night," Kirk began. He and McCoy were alone in the house, seated at the kitchen table over third cups of coffee. Spock had discreetly left the house after breakfast.

"And?" McCoy prompted.

"It doesn't really mean anything," Kirk went on. "All right, so I'm not a killer. Not killing Ghi could just be the coward's way out."

"Since when have you equated bravery with violence?" McCoy asked, sipping the hot liquid.

"That's not what I mean." Kirk stood, irritated.

"C'mon," McCoy commanded. "Let's go in the den and get comfortable."

"Don't pacify me!" Kirk complained, but followed the doctor into the other room and sprawled in a chair. "It has to mean something, Bones. It happened. To me. Ten months of my life... "

"Yes, it happened. You lived through hell. You suffered -- "

"And don't hit me with that flak about the nobility of suffering," Kirk scoffed.

"You don't believe that?"

"No, I don't."

"Neither do I. At least, not in every case. However, you *are* looking for reasons for suffering."

"So, I'm a finer person for surviving Anthrania? Shit."

"Are you a worse person?" McCoy countered.

"I don't know."

"How are you less the man than you were a year ago?" McCoy pressed, taking the lack of denial as an admission.

"Less the man... " Kirk echoed, his eyes drifting away. "Ah, my friend Bones, if you only knew... "

"Tell me."

"Never mind. There are some things that are too personal, too... humiliating."

"Like your impotence?" McCoy asked softly. Kirk glared at him, swiftly, menacingly. "I'm a doctor, remember? Your problem is not unique -- in fact, it's a hell of a lot more common than you may suspect."

Kirk was curious, despite his reluctance to discuss it. "Because of the camp?" he asked.

"Partly. In situations of prolonged physical and mental abuse, the sex drive is the first to disappear," McCoy explained.

"You said, 'partly.' What's the other part?" Kirk persisted.

"The here and now. You've been unable to resume other areas of your life." McCoy hesitated. "Jim, everything's connected. Your sex drive is linked to your self-image. You fail because you expect to fail."

"That's reassuring," Kirk snapped back. "Thanks a lot."

"It *will* work itself out, if you stop worrying about it. Give yourself time," McCoy admonished.

Kirk was silent a moment, then he asked, "Why do you think I expect to fail?"

"You tell me."

"I... haven't really tried," Kirk admitted.

"I'm not only referring to sex, Jim. Let me ask you this; how would you describe yourself? Give me a list of your positive qualities."

Kirk laughed thinly. "This is getting ridiculous. C'mon, Bones... "

"What's the matter? Can't you think of any? Not even, 'Jim Kirk's a nice guy?' "

"Hey, don't you ever let up?" Kirk wore the trapped look with which McCoy was becoming familiar. "Sure, I'm a nice guy, okay? Are you satisfied?"

"Are *you*?"

"Quit badgering me!" Kirk stood up, fists clenched. "This is getting us nowhere. I'm sick of being made to say things I don't want to say. It took the Anties ten months... " He broke off, heading for the doorway. McCoy moved swiftly, blocking his path.

"We don't *have* ten months. We've only got a few weeks. Unless you really don't give a damn, if the Enterprise and your friends don't mean anything to you -- "

Kirk raised one fist, hesitated, then slammed it against the wall. McCoy's voice grew louder.

"Unless you don't give a damn about *yourself*... "

"Leave me alone!"

"Doctor... " Neither man had heard the Vulcan enter the house. Spock's incredulous tone startled them both. McCoy glared. Spock's timing could not have been worse.

"Spock... " Kirk's voice shook despite his effort to sound normal. "Let's go for a swim. I'm finished here."

"No, you're not," McCoy insisted. "And Spock was just leaving, weren't you, Spock?"

"Jim, what is it? What's wrong?" Spock ignored McCoy, putting his hands on Kirk's shoulders.

"Our Captain was just telling me what a failure he is as a man, weren't you, Jim?" McCoy hammered.

Kirk's face went white in shock and fury, associating McCoy's remark with their intimate discussion. Ignoring Spock's look of puzzlement, Kirk spun on McCoy, knocking the Vulcan's hands away.

"Damn you, McCoy -- shut up!"

McCoy had felt they were almost on the verge of a crisis confrontation before Spock had entered, but now he could sense Kirk drawing away, retreating again, and he knew the moment was lost. Still, he tried.

"Take it easy, Jim," he soothed. "Face it and get it in the open. Talk about it -- "

Still misunderstanding, Kirk felt a deep humiliation and embarrassment. "Don't try to degrade me -- I won't stand here and let you -- " He clamped his lips shut, memories of situations too horrible to recall overpowering him. "Submission... possession... I've been there... I won't... "

"I'm not trying to degrade you. I'm trying to help you -- you know that," McCoy said harshly. "You can't keep refusing to answer me."

"Can't I?" Kirk dared. "Who are you that I can trust with my secrets? How do I know you won't run your mouth off to whoever... " He looked over at Spock.

Finally catching on to what Kirk must have thought he was implying, McCoy's face crumpled in pain. "Jim, my God, do you even have to ask? Everything you say to me is confidential. I'm your friend."

Kirk paused a moment to consider, knew McCoy was telling the truth. He could trust Bones... he knew that, yet lately he always suspected the wrong things. His mind struggled against the confusion.

"... everything on Anthranian has to be faced and put behind you... no secrets. Now that you're home, we'll... " McCoy was saying.

Kirk exploded. Yes, he could trust McCoy, but the man never let up. "You think you know all about it, don't you?" he interrupted. "But you never saw Jim Kirk crawl on his belly, rip his own flesh to get at a bowl of water... like an animal who'd chew off its leg to free itself... "

... He was beaten again, this time for trying to outsmart Ghi. He had made the commander look foolish in front of his guards, or so Ghi claimed. Kirk was stripped and flogged, Ghi urging the attackers to increased frenzy. Briefly, Kirk believed that they meant to kill him, and the thought held no terror. The violence seemed to take hours; Kirk would lose consciousness only to be doused by a bowl of water, awakened and beaten again.

Finally they released him from the ropes which bound him and at Ghi's instructions they shoved him face-down on the hard, concrete floor. Attached to the floor were two spiked metal cuffs with a spring-action closure. These were fastened around each of his upper thighs, points piercing his bruised flesh. His hands were chained behind his back. Movement was impossible. He was secured to the floor by the spiked cuffs and any attempt to shift position tore his skin. Ghi and the guards departed, leaving him alone in the room.

Dimly, he was aware of the passage of time. His bruised and swollen body recovered a little from the beating. He slept, woke, slept again in a haze of pain and delirium. Gradually, the conscious periods increased and it was then he found that it was impossible to hold his legs motionless, to prevent the spikes from digging his skin.

More than once he was shaken by a spasm of coughing as the membranes in his throat and mouth dried out from lack of water. Each cough jerked his limbs, doubling the agony in his legs.

It began to seem as if he had lain on the floor forever. Thirst became as great a problem

as pain. His belly hurt too badly for hunger, yet his body demanded fluid. His brain began to torture him with thoughts of water. Later, he would learn that he had been shackled to the floor for almost three days before a plan began to form vaguely in his semi-conscious mind.

About ten feet away sat the discarded bowl of Anthranian water.

He could crawl to it. He had only to drag himself forward.

The bands on his legs were not actually that tight. All he had to do was drag his legs through those spikes.

He tested his theory. One inch. He groaned as slashes, a quarter of an inch deep, were ripped into his legs.

Water. There. He could see it in the bowl. He had to have it.

Weakness washed over him. He wasn't sure he could do it.

Need superseded the fear of pain. He wiggled forward, putting his weight on his shoulders, rocking from left to right. A scream built up in his throat, but no sound escaped. He was too dry to make a noise. Fresh blood ran down his legs. Again, he paused.

Without the water, he would die. His thoughts became more disoriented. He believed the Anties had left him there to die, but that they had discounted his will to survive. Had they left the bowl of water by accident, or had it been left to taunt him?

It would be so much easier to give up, to lay still and die, but the instinct for self-preservation took over. He must get to that water.

Small, choking sounds tore from him as he moved again. He forced himself to dig his knees into the floor and pull the spikes downward. He twisted the upper portion of his body, tried to ignore the damage he was doing.

His senses swam with pain and fatigue. Worse, it felt as if he had made hardly any progress.

Inch by agonizing inch he worked himself loose. The spring-action on the cuffs adjusted to the circumference of his legs so that they never became very loose, not even after they were past his knees. He was forced to tear his shins as he continued to drag himself forward. Blood cushioned the pain, made his legs slippery.

After what had probably been hours, he was free, slipping his feet through the cuffs. For long moments he lay spent and dizzy, too exhausted and in such an extreme of agony that he could not move.

But the water was still there. Only several feet away.

Slowly, he dragged himself forward, no strength left to rise. Anticipation made him tremble, overrode the pain. Sensations of the cool, clear moisture on his lips drove him on, mesmerizing him.

He made it! Greedily, he stuck his face in the bowl of stale water, careful to keep his nose clear, snuffling the water into his depleted system with desperate eagerness. Intent upon his success, he did not hear the door open, nor the footsteps, until he vaguely discerned a pair of feet near the bowl.

Rolling onto his side, his eyes trailed up the figure. Ghi... Ghi, who sneered down upon him.

"Very good, my little animal. It took you long enough, but I compliment you on proving me right."

Dazed, confused, Kirk simply stared at him. Ghi stooped beside him, indicating the bowl of water. "My test was quite a success. Like a trapped animal, you tear your limbs off to free yourself. Like an animal, you lap the water from a bowl. Your species is primitive, indeed."

Kirk uttered an inarticulate sound. He had been duped, had played right into Ghi's hands.

What had seemed a victory now turned to bitter defeat. The water had been left for a purpose, the spikes had been used for a purpose. It was all another trick, meant to degrade and defile him.

Ghi reached down and touched his fingertips to Kirk's bloody thigh. "You certainly did a thorough job, Captain." His voice was smug. Kirk's body convulsed at the slight pressure on his leg. He tried to pull away. Abruptly, Ghi rose.

"I'll send someone in to dress your wounds and take you out of here. An animal doctor, perhaps, for the beast who calls himself a man. Look at yourself now, Human."

Kirk lay still, his legs burning with pain, his face burning with shame. Silent tears of rage and frustration trickled down his cheeks...

Kirk's eyes blurred with the memory. He had choked out enough of the story so that Spock and McCoy understood and their shock and concern tore at his emotions even further. This was the ugliness, the madness that he wanted to spare them -- and himself. Graphic violence was always shocking. He was a man of peace, bred in a society which held a high regard for all life. So were they all -- Spock, McCoy -- men of peace... The brutal memory of Anthrania defiled this place, these friends.

"My God, those bastards," McCoy mumbled. "Jim, listen, I -- "

"Don't say anything!" Kirk rasped. "I couldn't take it right now. Bones, I -- "

Spock moved in, his hand closing protectively on Kirk's arm. "Jim, we must -- "

"No!" Kirk didn't want their protection, their sympathy, their explanations. He needed time and distance and solitude. "Just... just give me some... room!" Almost blindly, he stumbled across the floor, rushing through the doorway to the refuge of the living area. McCoy rubbed his eyes wearily as Spock stood up, making a move to follow Kirk.

"Give it a minute, Spock. Let him re-group."

Then, both men heard the sound of the front door closing.

"Damn!" McCoy swore as Kirk's action was realized. "He's left the house!" Swiftly, he and Spock broke into the other room.

"You are pushing too hard," Spock accused, still fighting the backlash from the horror of Kirk's painful experience.

"Do you think I'm *enjoyin'* this?" McCoy snapped back. He flung open the door, spied Kirk's retreating figure running toward the beach.

"Where is he going?" Spock wondered aloud, his voice strained with concern.

"I don't think he knows -- or cares, at this point. He's trying to escape from himself."

"He must not be alone... " Spock moved outside. McCoy followed.

"You're right. We'd better go after him -- "

Spock faced McCoy urgently. "No -- let me go alone. He trusts me. You may upset him further."

Ruefully, McCoy saw the logic in that. The psychological 'roles' they had unwittingly adopted left the task in the hands of the Vulcan. He nodded. "All right, but handle him carefully." His eyes wandered to the shore, where Kirk was now approaching the cliff. "And -- hurry!"

Spock's expression softened for a moment and McCoy squeezed his arm. Swiftly, the Vulcan raced down the path.

Kirk saw the base of the cliff rising up in front of him. His steps faltered for a moment then he pressed on with grim determination. It didn't matter where he went, only that he escape the brutal scenes that his mind had been forced to recall. The beach was too open, too vast and empty; there was no answer, no resolution in the rolling surf. The rising peaks of the cliff beckoned to him and he suddenly wanted to climb, to reach the top, as if thereby he could once again attain the stars. Up he fled, leaving the ghastly scene behind, oblivious to a voice below calling his name.

The rocks were slippery, splashed by the waves; he used both hands and feet to scale the sheer slope. He rose higher, and his lungs began to feel the strain of the upward force of his flight. He slid, hearing the loose shale of pebbles cascade down beneath him. Picking himself up, he paused, conscious only of his immediate goal -- to reach the top of the cliff, as if he could see his own eternity from the height.

He was almost halfway there now. At this altitude the breeze from the ocean was stiff, a chilling force mixed with light damp spray that blew his hair roughly in his face, stung his eyes and ears. The rough silence was balm to his tortured spirit, lifting him free and cleansing his soul. He clung to the side of the cliff with arms and legs, letting the wild drum of his heart subside, gulping huge lungfuls of clear, sweet air.

He was not afraid. He was no longer hurting. Knowing he must come to terms with himself and somehow muster the courage to return to what he knew awaited him back down at the cottage, he was grateful for the basic he had discovered here of man against nature. He was oblivious to the dangers of the cliff, unconcerned over the situation in which he had placed himself.

Slowly, he released his grip, leaning over the precipice to stand against the wind. And suddenly, the quiet was pierced by a frantic call.

"Jim!"

He started, peering below in the direction of the familiar voice. Spock was rushing toward him with an expression of urgency and fear on his face, heedless of the slippery surface and the pull of the wind. Kirk braced himself, anguished at the interruption of his solitude, yet consoled by the Vulcan's ever-constant presence.

With Spock at his side, he could almost see the eternity which he had sought at the top of a cliff. It didn't take a mountain, it took a friend, he realized. Eagerly, Kirk watched him draw closer, bridging the space between them.

When he was almost near enough for Kirk to reach him, Spock's footing suddenly gave way. A misplaced step and the shale crumbled. A rock went careening down the slope. Horrified, Kirk saw the Vulcan lose his balance, his legs striking out blindly for an instant before his body pitched down the cliff. Kirk heard the strangled cry which vied with his own deafening scream:

"S S P P O O C C K K ! ! "

For a moment that seemed like forever, Kirk froze, lost in the uniform blackness which swirled around him. The tumbling form vanished from his sight, and the sea and the wind resumed their chorus -- the only sound in the ensuing silence. Immediately, Kirk's body responded, movement beginning before his mind could absorb the impact. Driven by fear and desperation, he slid, ran, staggered down the cliff, forgetting caution, frantic over what he might find.

There -- he could see Spock now at the base of the cliff, his body motionless and oddly twisted. Mouth dry, Kirk raced the remaining few feet to the Vulcan's side. He dropped to his knees and hesitated, overcome by a wave of rising hysteria.

Spock was lying on his side, sprawled with arms thrown out as if to break his fall. His clothes were torn and Kirk saw blood on his shoulders, back and chest. The back of his head rested in a spreading green pool against the edge of a boulder.

Kirk leaned forward, stretching one hand tentatively toward the Vulcan's face.

"Spock?" It was hardly a whisper. Kirk's throat was so tight that no air could pass. His fingers brushed the still-damp flesh of Spock's cheek. Terrified by the Vulcan's posture and pallor, Kirk was barely rational.

One thought preceded all others -- help! His mind raced ahead, trying to cope, struggling for a course of action. Help... McCoy. McCoy was back at the cottage. McCoy would know what to do.

Shaking, Kirk rose to his feet and ran toward the cottage, knees threatening to buckle with every stride. Terror drove him, a fear too horrible to be given a name, an unacknowledged suspicion that his efforts might be in vain.

McCoy must have heard his approach; somehow, the doctor was outside as Kirk hurled down the pathway.

"Bones... !"

"Jim -- what in... " McCoy rushed forward as Kirk faltered, sagging in the safety of his friend's arms.

"Spock," he gasped, urgency not permitting him even this tiny moment of relief. "He fell... from the cliff. He's... hurry, Bones."

McCoy's arms tightened responsively, reacting to the situation. "Easy, Jim. Catch your breath and don't panic. Where is he?"

"On the beach. I was afraid to move him -- afraid..." Kirk attempted to master his control, calm himself enough to be helpful. This was no time to fall to pieces, not when Spock's life depended on him. *Spock's... life...*

"All right," McCoy said calmly, but Kirk could see the anxiety in his eyes. "I'll get my kit. You can explain on the way."

Kirk dropped to the step as McCoy disappeared inside briefly. When he returned, Kirk had managed to catch his breath and gain some control over his charged emotions.

"C'mon, let's go," McCoy urged.

They ran, not the headlong frenzy which had driven Kirk to the cottage, but a steady, grim pace. Kirk tried to explain what had happened and tell what he could of Spock's condition. Kirk realized that he had neglected even the rudimentary basics of first-aid. He could not even tell McCoy if Spock had been breathing.

Oh God, no...

Finally, they rounded the base of the cliff, to the spot where Kirk had left the Vulcan. For an instant, Kirk faltered; Spock was gone! Then he spied him, several feet away, toward the cliff, lying face down, one hand resting limply on the scale of rock.

McCoy reached him first, Kirk flagging under the pressure of his pounding chest. Spots danced before his vision; shaking, Kirk sank to his knees beside them.

McCoy laid his fingers against the Vulcan's neck. "Spock?" He was answered by a low moan as a sudden tremor rippled through the Vulcan's form.

"Jim..." Spock whispered. "Where... ? Must find..."

Kirk leaned closer, his hands clenching in despair and anxiety. "I'm right here, Spock..."

Spock made an attempt to lift his head, but McCoy skillfully blocked the movement. "Lie still," he ordered, whipping out his scanner. Despite McCoy's warning, Kirk could see Spock's eyes trying to focus, searching through the confusion of returning awareness for his Captain. As McCoy carefully straightened twisted limbs and made necessary adjustments on his scanner, Kirk attempted to reassure.



"It'll be all right, Spock. Let Bones help you... I'm right here, take it easy... "

McCoy applied air splints to Spock's left thigh and upper arm, then carefully turned him and adjusted another cushion around his neck. Kirk wrestled with his own growing panic as McCoy's concern transmitted to him.

"He'll be okay, won't he, Bones?" Kirk gripped McCoy's forearm, imploring.

The doctor met his eyes, uncertainty reflected. "There are multiple injuries," he began.

"And?" Kirk demanded.

"And I don't want to risk shock on top of it all," McCoy flared back. "We've got to get him back to the cottage -- now."

The urgency brooked no argument. Kirk nodded grimly. Then, another low sound of pain from Spock sent an ice cold knife slicing through Kirk's midsection.

"Jim... " The Vulcan struggled to sit up. "I am... "

"Hush!" Kirk insisted. "Just relax. We've got you," he soothed. Together, they carried the semi-conscious Vulcan to the house and got him settled in bed.

Kirk tried to anticipate McCoy's needs, gathering supplies, clearing a work area, but managed to feel more in the way than helpful as McCoy conducted his examination. The doctor's only comments were directed to Spock as the Vulcan's lucidity came and went. Kirk cradled Spock's head as McCoy wiped away the blood and grime from the base of the skull.

"Looks like a concussion," McCoy explained. "But I want to run a few tests to be sure that's all it is."

Spock's voice was muffled against Kirk's shirt. "I... understand."

"Then you understand that you must not enter a healing trance with a head injury," McCoy cautioned.

"Impossible... anyway," Spock murmured.

Reluctantly, Kirk laid Spock back against the bed and stood up, moving out of McCoy's way. The frustration of total helplessness consumed him and he shivered involuntarily. His eyes strayed toward the hall and he wandered to stand by the doorway, confusion making his movements uncertain.

These rooms, so recently the sight of an unfolding nightmare, were washed with memory. The painful scene which had taken place here today was now overshadowed by poignant images of Spock. That first day when he had so delightedly shown Kirk his 'surprise'... every quiet evening they had spent together... every time Kirk had faltered and Spock had been there... even the evening in the den when Spock had been so anguished and despairing -- all now blended in a swirl of warmth and tenderness that stung Kirk's eyes.

The accident had happened so fast. One moment he was watching the Vulcan climb, anticipating his companionship, then in an instant, Kirk's whole life had slanted, twisted, turned upside down.

The weight of worry bore down on him. Kirk wanted to run, to hide from the hideous reality, but this time there was nowhere left to retreat.

Spock would be all right -- he had to be all right. It couldn't end -- he couldn't lose him before he had a chance to show him.... his friend had suffered so much for his sake.

I've put him through hell these past months... no, this past year, for that matter. Lord, how much more must he bear?

Unable to stand the stress of his own thoughts, Kirk glanced back over at McCoy and the bed. Spock looked so pale and vulnerable with the heavy gray air splints giving support to his

broken body. McCoy had removed all restrictive clothing and draped him with a thermal blanket for warmth, but Spock was trembling under the covers.

"Jim?" McCoy's call brought him quickly to the bed. "Stay with him for a minute. I have to put this sample through analysis. I'll work in the kitchen." Abruptly, McCoy broke his professional concentration. He looked up at Kirk intently. "Are *you* okay?"

"I'm all right, Bones. Go on," Kirk urged, not wanting to be the object of McCoy's concern. *Spock -- take care of Spock*, he insisted silently. McCoy nodded and moved away. Kirk eased himself down, sitting on the bed beside his friend. Tenderly, he drew the blanket more securely over Spock's shoulders.

"Can I do anything?" he asked.

"No..." Spock declined through shivering lips. Then, "I don't... remember falling."

"We were... pretty high up," Kirk told him.

"I was... suddenly on the ground... alone. I looked for you... you were gone..." Spock clamped his lips together as another pain gripped him. Kirk took his hand and squeezed it softly in consolation. The pressure of Spock's returning grip was fierce.

"I went for McCoy," Kirk explained. "You were out cold."

Spock didn't reply; he continued to clutch Kirk's hand. Gently, Kirk reached up with his other hand and began stroking Spock's damp hair, trying to calm, to ease the pain.

"Jim... !" No further words were necessary. Kirk could see the urgency and fear in Spock's face and understood the problem. He quickly lifted the Vulcan into a reclining position and supported him as he choked, gasping as his stomach emptied its contents. The spasm lasted a long, agonizing minute and Kirk imagined the fresh pain in bruised muscles and broken bones as Spock tried not to move or jar his injuries. Kirk held him firmly, feeling each contraction in his own gut, sympathetic vibrations in full play. When Spock hurt, he hurt -- with an ache more powerful than physical pain.

Someone pressed a towel to Spock's face. Kirk looked up, startled and realized that McCoy had returned. "Damn it, Bones," Kirk moaned. "Can't you *help* him? Do something!"

"Okay, Jim," McCoy soothed them both with a compassionate tone. "Easy, Spock -- lie back now. That's right." He pressed a hypospray to Spock's neck. In a few seconds the patient visibly relaxed and Kirk allowed himself to breathe regularly again.

"Spock, the medication will dull the pain and you may sleep a little. But don't go too deep. I'll be here watching you, all right?"

Spock's eyes were already growing dull with fatigue. "Yes," he managed. "I... quite understand..."

McCoy rested a hand on Kirk's shoulder. "A concussion can be a serious thing, Jim, but there's no evidence of intercranial pressure or any brain stem injury. Rest and quiet are the best therapy. We'll keep the room dark and monitor his vital signs for the next few days."

Kirk stood up and moved to the window where McCoy was now pulling the shade. "What about the rest of his injuries?" He scowled anxiously.

"He was damn lucky," McCoy sighed. "Nothing is broken -- a few sprains, and his right shoulder is dislocated. There's bruising internally along his ribcage and right hip. As soon as he's recovered from the initial shock, his body should be able to mend itself pretty fast."

Kirk rubbed at his mouth with the back of his hand. "I can't quite... believe it all yet. I guess I'm still... numb," he murmured.

McCoy grabbed his hand, held it out for Kirk to see the rough quivering in his own fingers. "Numb?" McCoy hissed, keeping his voice low in the sickroom. "Hell, you're the one who's bleeding internally. Don't deny it, Jim."

"Bones... it hurts to... care so much... "

McCoy met the pain-filled hazel eyes. "Yeah... I know, Jim. But that doesn't stop us, does it?"

Fatigue washed over Kirk, causing a debilitating weakness. He slumped.

"Go lie down," McCoy instructed. "I'll call if I need you." Kirk nodded and turned away. He paused by Spock's bed, a memory jolted.

'I need... '

'What?'

'... you.'

Strength somehow renewed, he addressed McCoy. "Take care of him, Bones."

- 5 -

For the next several days, Kirk kept an almost constant vigil at Spock's bedside. They took most of their meals together on trays and even at night Kirk was up checking on the Vulcan more than he was in his own room. Even though Spock slept a lot, sedated so that his injuries would heal more quickly, able to rest knowing Kirk was in capable hands, still the Captain waited patiently for the peaceful, waking times.

They talked quietly, sharing memories of life on the Enterprise, teasing each other fondly. A subtle change had come over Kirk and Spock was not sure what had happened or whether it was good or bad. The man at his bedside was all too poignantly familiar, and logic could not explain it. Where logic failed, Spock turned to McCoy for an explanation.

Although the Vulcan had pronounced himself out of danger and did, indeed, seem to be recovering, McCoy continued to hover, keeping a tyrannical watch on his patient.

"Don't tell me you're fine, Spock. My instruments prove you're lying," McCoy asserted.

"Vulcans are -- "

" -- not infallible. Now be quiet and take your medication." McCoy handed him a cup.

"Where is the Captain?" Spock asked, his fingers fidgeting with the cup, prolonging the inevitable.

"He's resting, finally. As *you* should be."

"Doctor... " Spock hesitated.

"What is it, Spock?"

"He... seems different. Have you spoken to him? Is the therapy... "

"No therapy, Spock." McCoy sighed, settling on the edge of the bed. "No, we haven't talked since the accident. Jim needs this respite and I think his concern over you has negated his own problems temporarily."

Spock leaned back, still avoiding the medication. "I feared... the memory of that incident on Anthrania, then at the cliff... it looked as though he might... jump," he admitted.

"He needs to remember those things, Spock... needs to get them out in the open, face them. You know that. We talked about what kind of approach I was going to use."

"Yes, but still, he's been under such a strain. I was afraid... it might be too much for him."

McCoy's eyes softened. "Look who's talking. Spock, I... I don't want to lecture you, but as a doctor, I'm obliged to point out certain facts which you may be overlookin'."

"Proceed." Spock closed his eyes, steeling himself for whatever was coming. Whenever McCoy 'wasn't going to lecture', he did.

"The strain under which you've been functioning, the continual battle you've been waging... "

"Is not important," Spock broke in wearily.

"You've overextended your resources. Even that Vulcan stamina of yours has a limit," McCoy went on. "You placed yourself in jeopardy, and you don't have the resiliency to bounce back any more. Now I want you to leave Jim to me. Lie here and concentrate on yourself -- on getting well."

"Doctor, I am not -- "

"If you don't -- I'll send you to town, to the medical center there."

Spock opened his eyes. "Blackmail is hardly ethical in your profession," he stated calmly. McCoy's stare met his in challenge. "However, there is merit to your statement," Spock went on neutrally. "For a day or so, I shall comply."

"Comply with what?" Kirk's voice startled them both. McCoy's smile deepened.

"Spock's just decided it would be wise to follow his doctor's advice. Now, if I can just get you to agree with that decision... "

"Is he bullying you, Spock?" Kirk asked lightly.

"I am really in no condition to protest, Jim." Spock did look incapacitated, and Kirk sympathized all too easily.

"I suggest," McCoy interceded, "that we get out of here and let our Vulcan get his rest. Care to join me in a glass of brandy?"

Kirk hesitated, sobering, then he nodded. "Sure, Bones. I'll be back, Spock."

"Make mine a double," Kirk instructed, as McCoy opened the cabinet. Away from the bedroom, Kirk dropped his manner of casual cheer and seemed to wilt. McCoy poured two generous glasses of the brandy and handed one to Kirk before settling himself in a chair.

"I never thought I'd say this," Kirk mused, "but I'm getting mighty sick of shore leave." McCoy smiled, amused, and Kirk went on. "The inactivity is getting so bad, I actually spent a couple of hours this afternoon working on Spock's cataloging."

"Oh, Spock will love that," McCoy responded. "Fussy as he is about his work... "

"Bones -- " Kirk leaned forward. "Is he really all right?"

"Sure, he's fine," McCoy assured quickly.

"Then why do I have the feeling that you're holding out on me?" Kirk challenged. "Something is bothering you, Doctor."

"Me?" McCoy seemed startled.

"You've been avoiding me since the accident," Kirk pointed out. "You've... drawn away. No more talks, no more badgering..." Kirk tried for lightness, but it failed.

"I figured you needed a break. I've been pushing pretty hard," McCoy admitted.

Kirk regarded him thoughtfully, trying to understand, to read between the words. "It's not like you to... back off?... give in?" He tried various phrases for size, yet none described what he wanted to say. McCoy only stared at his glass, no help at all. A new thought suddenly struck, a possible interpretation. "Bones -- do you... blame *me* for what happened to Spock? Is that it? Do you think because I..."

"No!" McCoy looked up. "No, Jim. Any guilt in this must ultimately rest on *my* shoulders," he said deliberately. "I'm the one who lost control of the last session, went too far..."

"That's not true," Kirk insisted. "You were doing what you thought best."

"Then," McCoy continued, gauging Kirk's reaction, "I let Spock go after you, when it should have been me. At the least, I should have gone along."

"Look, Bones, we've all been under a strain. Just your being here means so much to me. I can't begin to tell you..." Kirk smiled at him. "I hate what you're doing, but I love you for doing it. Please, don't blame yourself."

"Strain is no excuse," McCoy countered, carefully guiding the direction of the conversation, hoping that feigning guilt would lead to Kirk's understanding of his own situation. He regarded his friend steadily. "There's no room, in my profession, for error."

"Something like a starship captain?" Kirk reflected. "I never..."

"Most people don't think about it," McCoy cut in. "Yes, like you, if I make a mistake, someone can die. A doctor learns to deal in human lives, learns to live with that very human margin of error," he explained. "We're trained, just as you were trained by Starfleet, to accept our vulnerability, to know that we are not infallible."

Kirk tested out a half formed idea as he struggled within himself for understanding. "I knew that... once. The fleet's damned hard on you if you make a mistake, yet they teach you not to be hard on yourself. Somehow, everything became twisted on Anthrania. It was as if I had to... super-excel, make no errors. I don't know... I've learned to live with mistakes before this..."

"You've made them. We all have," McCoy agreed, driving home his point.

"I carried the weight of responsibility for the death of Captain Garrovick around for years," Kirk recalled. "And there were... oh, Lord, countless small errors when I could have... maybe should have... turned in my Captain's braid. But I didn't... because it's all part of the job and we're taught to accept and go on..."

"Would you rather have starships run by computers, like the M-5?" McCoy asked softly.

Kirk winced. "Not on your life! I believe in what I'm doing. Essentially, I believed in the original mission to Anthrania. I suppose I still do."

"I think you do," McCoy agreed. "And I think you're beginning to come to terms with your guilt. I think the guilt is just a smokescreen to cover deeper wounds, more personal scars. You're hiding behind your command image -- expecting that Captain's braid to protect you from a face-to-face confrontation with James T. Kirk."

Kirk thought that over silently for a moment. Then, "I've *seen* the dark side of myself,

long before I ever arrived on Anthrania. I know what exists within."

"That *should* give you a unique edge over most people, Jim." McCoy encouraged the direction of the conversation, nursing it along with infinite patience and care. "You were forced to accept, in a most dramatic way, the base side of your nature."

"I had nightmares for weeks," Kirk responded steadily. "Yet I learned to go on, to live with it." He stood, starting to pace. "And I'll tell you something, Bones. I'm beginning to believe that I may learn to live with the memories of Anthrania. Look -- I haven't had a single... incident of amnesia since your arrival," he boasted, a show of bravado.

"Perhaps that's because you're doing something positive now. You're facing some of your demons," McCoy suggested.

"That may be," Kirk admitted, a slight wariness coming into his eyes. He was suddenly reminded of the things which he had not yet revealed. "All I know is that you've been a tremendous help to me and I hope you realize how much I appreciate it."

McCoy came to stand beside him. He frowned, sensing that Kirk was deliberately changing the subject. "Jim, unless I'm one hundred percent satisfied of a complete success, I don't deserve any gratitude and I won't accept any thanks. Okay, you're fighting now and you've shown some progress, but don't fool yourself into a false sense of security. Those walls you've built up still have to come tumbling down."

"All right, 'Joshua'. Tear my illusions apart," Kirk teased fondly.

McCoy smiled self-consciously, slightly embarrassed by Kirk's affectionate tone. Subtly, he relaxed, slipping out of his role as analyst and physician, sharing the quiet moment as a friend. "Hmn... sometimes I feel more like Daniel -- in the lion's den," he mused.

Kirk crossed the room to retrieve his glass and sat down, pensive. "I'll admit, when you first arrived, I... didn't want this. I was... frightened by it. I knew I had to talk it out, knew I needed help, but... if it had been anyone other than you, Bones, I don't think I could have."

McCoy was disturbed by the past tense tone of the conversation. It was good that Kirk was beginning to feel more confident, but McCoy knew that the crisis had not been reached. They had only scratched the tip of the iceberg so far, and the impression which Kirk generated was that all was uncovered. As McCoy tried to form a reply, Kirk went on.

"A curious thing occurred, Bones. When Spock went down that cliff... at that time, and for quite a while after that, I... didn't think about Anthrania at all. It took a while for me to sort it all out in my head, but I finally realized that those ten months, while they were important, were not the end of my life. Life goes on and caring goes on and suffering... I thought I'd suffered all I could bear on Anthrania, but if anything happened to Spock it would... everything else paled by comparison."

Applause stirred silently deep inside McCoy. A near-tragic accident had accomplished what perhaps months of therapy may not have proven to Kirk. The wonders of the Universe were great, indeed, he reflected.

"It's very important that you don't forget that, Jim," he stressed. The brief moment of rest was gone; McCoy was once more the professional. "We all suffer -- struggle -- all our lives, in a series of valleys and peaks. If you can exorcise the Anthranian experience, put it in its proper place in your life and build from it, go on with the established pattern of things, then you've won the battle. I think you can understand that a little better now."

Kirk leaned forward, intense. "Then *why* must we continue to concentrate on those ten months?"

Although the appeal was profound, McCoy's voice was hard. "Because you have not finished with it. You're still trying to hide, telling yourself now that it's not important -- another trick you're pulling on yourself. It *is* important, and it's important that you explore why you feel the way you do about yourself as a result of the ordeal. A false sense of security is more dangerous than no security."

"Damn -- what do you *want* from me?" Kirk exploded. A frown creased his forehead. McCoy perched on the arm of Kirk's chair.

"I'm not trying to minimize the progress you've made. I'm pleased, Jim. I'm proud of the way you're handling all this. You're fighting, you're learning, you're beginning to accept. You're recovering what you lost in those ten months. I'm just sayin' that we're not finished. And you know we're not." He slipped his arm around the back of the chair, circling Kirk without touching. "But we'll get there. Tomorrow we'll start talking -- *really* talking, again. We're going to strip away the acts and pretenses and get it all out in the open."

Kirk leaned back against McCoy's arm, and drew a ragged breath. "All right," he sighed. Inwardly, he coiled himself against the fear of starting again, of the grueling sessions with McCoy -- and more, what he knew it was that still remained to be faced. Yet he trusted McCoy and knew he must make the effort if McCoy said it was necessary. He owed his friends so much. He owed them the strength to try.

The reluctance to discuss Anthrania made Kirk restless that night. Awake, he pondered their philosophical discussion. It seemed as if every time he solved one riddle there was another looming before him. Every time he felt he had put Anthrania behind him, someone told him that he had not.

I'd be better off if they just let it be, he thought rebelliously. McCoy forces me to relive it all -- I don't want to think about it. I have a starship -- I know now I want to return to her. I have Spock and Bones -- I'm back. Why won't they let me go on?

A hidden memory, too horrible to be recalled, lurked behind his conscious thoughts. *I know what he wants, Kirk reflected without acknowledging the memories. I'm just not sure I can -- or want to -- deliver.*

McCoy would press, he knew, extracting every painful moment of that ordeal, forcing him to relive what he never wanted to remember.

He must not think about it; must not let in the fear and loathing. He closed his eyes, determined to try to rest. In the dark, he felt as if he were falling; he clutched the sides of the bed to steady himself.

There had been a garbage pit behind the compound on Anthrania. Sometimes they were made to clean it out. Once, an angry guard had thrown Kirk into the pit head-first. When he tried to crawl out, the same guard had stepped on his fingers, making him sink back in.

He was falling into that pit again. He felt the dirty, slimy sides, smelled the rotten odor of decay and filth.

Oh God, let me out... let me out...

- 6 -

The next day, McCoy allowed Spock to get out of bed. It was a forced concession; the Vulcan, feeling well and rested, refused to be treated as an invalid. Even Kirk tried to discourage him, but Spock was adamant.

Despite Kirk's solicitous misgivings, he was relieved to have Spock join them. Secretly he hoped it would forestall McCoy's plan to commence with their talks. On this pleasant day, with these pleasing companions, he had no wish to return to Anthrania. He knew what McCoy wanted to talk about and something prevented him from cooperating.

After they had eaten, Kirk continued to sit and chatter, purposeless conversation which he kept up nervously.

"We really ought to do something special today," Kirk declared. "Perhaps we could drive into town. Bones, you've been here all this time and Spock and I haven't shown you any of the local attractions. We could have lunch at that little place... what's it called, Spock? The ... Athenian?"

"The Aparthenon... " Spock replied. "Excellent cuisine, Doctor. We discovered it quite by accident, and... "

McCoy scowled. "Mm-hum, I'm sure. But we already have something special to do today, don't we, Jim?" McCoy recognized Kirk's attempts to avoid discussing Anthrania. Kirk was playing games again, and while it grieved McCoy to be the heavy in this crucial psychodrama, it was necessary that no further delays be allowed. Left alone, he knew, Kirk would postpone the confrontation indefinitely.

Kirk gave McCoy his most disarming smile. "Nothing that won't wait until another day," he coaxed.

"Don't waste that fatal Kirk charm on me, Jim -- I'm immune, remember? We're not going anywhere today."

Spock attempted to catch up to the conversation. "What have you planned, McCoy?"

Kirk's mouth tightened grimly. "Oh, Bones wants to go somewhere, all right. He wants to go to Anthrania. He's developing quite a fascination with that place."

McCoy addressed Spock but kept his eyes on Kirk. "Our Captain thinks he's fine now, Spock. He doesn't want to talk about the past any more."

Kirk stood up roughly. "I'm alive! I want to go on living! I want to think about the future -- "

"You mean," McCoy jumped up, too, "you *don't want* to face the past. What are you so damned afraid of?"

Kirk slammed his fist on the table. "I'm not an insect for you to dissect. If I say I've put it behind me -- "

"You *know* you haven't! Jim... " McCoy reached across the table and put his hands on Kirk's shoulders. "I'm not tryin' to dissect you. The Anties did that. I'm tryin' to put the pieces back together."

Kirk's chest heaved with his labored breathing. Gradually, he quieted. McCoy went on.

"There's nothing here to fear. It's only me -- and Spock, if you like. We're your friends. We want to help."

"But it's all been said," Kirk groaned raggedly. "We've been over it and over it."

"Not entirely." McCoy's voice was patient and soft. "The most difficult part is still ahead of us. But you can face it, Jim. You've got the strength now and the will to do it. C'mon, let's go sit down," he instructed. Gently he drew Kirk with him, out to the living area. Without hesitation, Spock followed them, troubled.

"Doctor," he began, "what is the purpose of this? It would seem... "

"Things are not always what they seem, Mr. Spock," McCoy interrupted. "Jim knows what I'm talking about. Throughout our talks we've always avoided, skirted, put off that final confrontation. That is the real area of contention. The one scene you refuse to face, to

put in the open," he continued, talking now to the motionless Kirk, "is when Ghi forced you to confess."

Kirk would not sit. He stood, clenching his hands. "You know what happened. You heard the tape from Anthrania."

"What has happened to that daring James Kirk that you can't face what it meant to you? Have you changed that much?" McCoy charged.

"Doctor!" Spock warned.

Kirk, so intent on McCoy, barely heard the Vulcan's protest. "I've changed but not the way you imply! For ten months, I resisted! I held out -- "

"But you gave up in the end. You gave the Anthranians what they wanted." McCoy's heart was skidding, hating what he was doing to his friend.

"I had no choice! What else could I have done?" Kirk shuddered, blocked in, unable to escape.

"I don't know," McCoy said softly. "Tell me what it took for you to make that tape. Tell me why you finally gave a confession."

Spock interceded, physically stepping between the two men. "McCoy, don't you think -- "

"Stay out of this, Spock!" McCoy rasped. "Either shut up or get out."

It was all beginning to crash in on Kirk; he struggled to deny the memory, to avoid the telling which made it reality. Desperately, he clutched Spock's arm. "Spock -- you understand. I don't want to -- I can't -- it mustn't end like this!"

"It's not an ending, Jim," McCoy asserted. "It's a beginning. Get it over and you can go on -- live that future you're talking about."

Kirk wavered. A part of him knew McCoy was right, knew he must do what the doctor instructed. Spock, too, despite the pain from which he wished to shield Kirk, could agree with McCoy's motivation.

"Jim, be seated," Spock suggested quietly. "Perhaps if we proceed calmly, reasonably... "

"Reasonably!" Kirk backed away from him, the seeming betrayal making him angry. Spock had thrown in with McCoy; they were after him. They wouldn't realize he wanted only to spare *them*. "There *is* no reason to this charade! Shall I calmly tell you how I succumbed to enemy torture and threats? How I calmly denied my oath, my conscience? How I reasonably deduced it was time to give up? You two had no idea what it was really like! You poke at this thing vicariously -- but I *lived* it -- and I can't make you see -- you won't understand -- "

"We *know* what happened," McCoy broke in. "I've seen the reports. You confessed. You broke. You admitted to spying. What's important here, Jim, is what it did to you -- how you felt -- what you're still afraid to face right now."

Kirk was past comprehending McCoy's statement. He wrapped his arms around himself. "Damn you! You want all the gruesome details? Want to hear the whole sadistic ordeal? They were going to kill us -- all of us -- save me for last, so I could watch. They were through playing games with us. This time they meant business, only I didn't know that at first. I thought we were in for some more of their sadistic torture, then I looked around and saw that we were *all* there -- in the courtyard. They made us stand in a semi-circle with guards on each of us. We had to stand there a long time. No one was allowed to speak or move -- they butted us with a stick if we tried to relax or say something. I thought, 'what are they up to now?'

"Then that bastard -- Ghi -- arrived with more guards and they had Klingon disruptors. That's when I began to suspect this time was going to be different. Something in Ghi's face warned me he was out for blood." Kirk's breathing became labored, his eyes glazed as the scene in his mind was replayed.

"I still thought maybe -- maybe I was wrong. Maybe I was overreacting because we'd all been through so much of this damned stuff and the Anties were feeding off our nerves... making us wait, prolonging the actual torture so that we were all about to explode by the time it came. I thought that's why they made us stand there so long... just anticipating what was to come...

"I tried to appear calm... I didn't know if I succeeded but I wasn't going to give that son-of-a-bitch the satisfaction of seeing our anxiety. I tried to look at the other men... give them a sign to appear indifferent. I tried to rationalize that the worst they could do was inflict more pain on us and God knows we were all becoming conditioned to that... but I couldn't seem to communicate. The men were all watching Ghi and they looked terrified. I think I knew they, too, must be suspecting that Ghi was up to something special.

"Then he spoke to us -- in Standard. He told us that our time was up -- that he was going to execute us all unless we confessed at once..."

... Guards dragged the remaining nine prisoners to the courtyard. The effects of the past week's intensified brutality was evident. They limped, struggling with the burdens of those too weak to walk. The guards showed them no mercy; they struck anyone who slowed the procession. Dave Wyman leaned heavily on Marty Anderson. Harvey Landers was supported by Mell Travis and Bill Pressman, while Jack Langenberg helped Victor Garcia. Kirk, one leg barely able to support his weight, hobbled along beside Carl Monroe.

In the courtyard, it appeared as though someone had given the wrong signal. The stage was seemingly set -- there were two new, thick poles set into the hard-packed dirt, guards milled about with holiday enthusiasm, yet there was no sign of Ghi or any of the other leaders. The prisoners were ordered to stand erect for what slowly evolved into hours.

They stood in a wide semi-circle, each man ten feet apart and flanked by two guards, forced to remain motionless and silent while the agony of bruised and battered muscles and flesh screamed in protest. Finally, Ghi strode from the compound, accompanied by three guards with Klingon disruptor pistols on their hips.

Ghi, in his immaculate uniform, stepped into the center of the semi-circle, facing them, his hands clenched together in front of him. Kirk mustered the strength to stand up straighter.

"Aliens -- " Ghi began, his normally oily voice harsh, "you have had a long timespan to confess to your crimes against our land. We have been patient. We have been just and fair with you. Now your time has expired. Unless I receive an immediate confession -- on tape -- I am authorized to execute you all..."

"For a moment I was almost relieved. God, I guess that shows how damned cocky I was... but we'd all heard that bluff before. They weren't going to kill us, they didn't really want us dead, we'd become convinced of that. There was no way the Anthranian officials would be able to justify our mass slaughter to the Federation. I tried to gauge the other men's reaction to Ghi's statement, to see if they were thinking it was a bluff, but they looked as if they believed him. Some of them glanced in my direction and I... I felt their fear. It was... unnerving."

Kirk drew his hand across his mouth and shut his eyes. He swallowed, trying to maintain control, forcing himself to voice, in a concise, factual manner, the turmoil he had felt.

McCoy let out a breath. "Go on, Jim. You're doing fine," he whispered.

Kirk opened his eyes. "Spock?" A pain-filled expression sought the Vulcan.

"Here, Captain." The voice held quiet support.

"Spock, I believed in the Federation. You -- I -- we are schooled, programmed to believe in their ideals. I never doubted them. In all the months on Anthrania, I expected them to rescue us... the mightiest power in all the Universe... they had to have the means to save a handful of their people. We were doing a job for them and they *cared* about us..."

"It was as if Ghi could read my mind... That stinking Anthranian... he learned much about us

during that time, he did his homework well. He said, then, that the Federation had washed their hands of us... that's the way he said it, in his arrogant, stilted Standard. He looked at me, told me I was responsible for my men... he called them animals... and it was my duty to confess, say I... we... were spying. He said his superiors had ordered our execution, that we were no longer any value to them... "

... Ghi went on. "Your government has washed their hands of this whole affair. You are of no value to them -- or to us. My superiors demand your extermination." He looked directly at Kirk. "Captain, you are responsible for these animals. It is your duty to give the confession, to say to my people that you are a liar and a spy sent by the Federation. You shall do so -- NOW..."

"I... tried not to believe him... He was still trying to trick a confession out of us... but why *hadn't* the Federation done something? For ten months we had been left there to rot...

"I made myself not think about it... Ghi was waiting for an answer and I said something smart-assed to him and one of the guards hit me. He became livid then, but his voice was cold as ice... Oh God, if I could have had just ten minutes alone with him then. I wanted to smash his face in, choke the breath out of him, make him cry in pain the way he did to us...

"He told me I was foolish, that my men would die, one by one. He waited for me to confess, but I still refused... God, I *still* refused... I still thought he was bluffing. I didn't know I didn't know what he meant to do. I... I... was defiant. I stood there and... and...

"He turned to the others, asked *them* to confess... Maybe they didn't believe him either, maybe they were just too scared to speak... I don't know... I don't even know what *I* was thinking then... but no one said a word. We all just stood there... stood there waiting... and then Ghi moved... "

... Kirk shuddered. He had so little strength left with which to face Ghi. Still, he muttered, "Go to hell."

A blow from one of the guards made him stagger backward. Ghi held up his hand to forestall any further action.

"You are foolish, Captain. One by one I shall kill your men. Not you. You will watch them die. Save them now by telling the truth or it will be too late."

Kirk stood in mute defiance. Abruptly, Ghi turned to the others.

"Will any of you spare this slaughter? Anderson? You, Pressman? A confession in exchange for nine lives. This man you call Captain is a coward. He will save his own skin and watch *you* die." No one spoke. Several looked over at Kirk uneasily. Ghi became enraged. He turned back to Kirk. "You lead them! Now, only *YOUR* confession will be accepted. You do not believe. All right, Captain. Watch them die..."

"I knew he meant it -- I could see it on his face. But somehow I couldn't believe it." Kirk groaned, forcing the words out. He stumbled across the room, away from Spock and McCoy, as if distance made it easier to relate. "They had tortured us, degraded us, even murdered when it was unavoidable, but we'd always felt -- somehow -- we'd *live* through it. Because we were Starfleet. The Federation would somehow extricate us. Oh God, it wasn't death. We were prepared to die -- we thought -- I thought -- I was prepared -- for myself -- not for them. I couldn't be responsible..."

"Easy, Jim," McCoy calmed, moving toward him.

"You asked to hear this! So, listen, damn it!" Kirk thrust out his arm to ward off McCoy's approach.

"They took Mell Travis -- he was nearest to the posts. They -- tied him to one of them. Some of the guards -- with knives -- began to cut him. I had to watch. There was no way to avoid it... It was like a nightmare -- in slow motion. And I... we... stood there in almost hypnotized fascination while they -- they butchered him... cutting him... eviscerating him... Oh, shit... he was dismembered like an animal... there was blood everywhere. He was mutilated ... not just murdered. They mutilated him and I watched... watched him try to scream... watched his eyes... his eyes... and I knew... they would do this to the others. My men... humans with souls... These aliens had no concept... it had to be stopped... I had to stop it... but I... I couldn't... I was helpless... helpless... Ghi wouldn't listen... wouldn't stop. I screamed at him -- stop! Stop it! But it went on and on..."

... Travis was bound to the post. A gag was stuffed into his mouth. Without a blindfold, his eyes seemed to dominate his face -- wild, frightened eyes that looked without seeing. Kirk and the others had no choice but to watch.

The guards toyed with Travis. Small slashes to his chest - arms - abdomen - thighs. The knives were raised to his face. Travis' eyes bulged as his throat worked to utter muffled screams through the binding. His face was cut in several places. His ears were sliced away. Blood covered him.

"Stop it!" Kirk lunged at his guards, trying to surge forward. He was boxed in by guards, subdued, held fast in place, yet they did not strike him. Ghi, at Kirk's left, looked amused.

"Your choice, Captain."

The assassins at the post were enjoying their work, warming to the task. The cuts were going deeper now, ripping open the muscles in Travis' arms and chest. The man's body heaved with tremors of agony. His head lolled to one side.

The other prisoners were sick, white-faced with loathing. Everything seemed to blur and suspend. Kirk tried to reach Ghi, but the guards held him more tightly.

"You bastard! Tell them to stop this!"

"Too late, Captain. Watch..."

"Travis was dead and still they continued... I couldn't think. My head was pounding. I had to make them stop... had to reach them. Him... Ghi... he was the one. I knew what he wanted. It was my responsibility... mine. My duty... to the Federation... to my men... He... Ghi... wanted... refused... I had to do something. They were playing with us... a deadly game... deadly, murderous... cold-blooded slaughter... innocent victims..." Kirk held his hand up to his eyes, sobbing. "Who were these barbaric aliens that they should do this to other living, sentient beings? Where was our Federation when Mell Travis was being destroyed? For ten months we held out... waiting. We told them nothing, resisted... for what? Now this... this was Mell's ending... this was the end of it all. There was no justice... what would we gain by dying? The men would all die... would all be massacred... He ... said it and... and he meant it. He meant to destroy them all... all useless... no purpose to their deaths... nothing but death... death and torture...."

... The knives were ripping to bone, piercing vital organs. The muffled screams turned to gurgles as Travis' lungs filled with his own blood. Still they hacked. Flesh tore and hung in bloody fragments, even when Travis could feel no more. Viscera disgorged, blood ran from his eyes and nose, genitals were amputated.

Kirk retched, his empty stomach giving up nothing. Tears of rage and frustration rolled down his face.

At last, Ghi clapped his hands and the guards ceased. The body was cut down and tossed to one side like a piece of meat. Slowly, thoughtfully, Ghi walked around the arc of prisoners.

"We are contaminated by your filthy carcasses. We grow weary of your presence." He signaled to the guards who held Wyman and Landers. "Take these two -- they look half-dead already..."

"I knew... somehow... I had to put a stop to it. I couldn't go through it again! There was no way to reason with Ghi... we had gone past that now. He wanted us all dead. It didn't matter... nothing mattered to the damn... Anties." Kirk was breathing hard, words tumbling out in rapid succession. He was engulfed by the nightmare, reliving the terror of the moment on Anthrania, losing touch with reality.

"So you agreed to make the tape," McCoy interrupted, his voice hushed, trying to draw Kirk back to the present. Kirk paused a moment at the sound of McCoy's voice, seeming to grasp awareness, then went on.

"It wasn't that simple. I tried... I don't know if I meant it or if I was stalling, but I told Ghi I'd do it. He... laughed... and then he knocked me down..." Kirk shuddered. "I... had... to make... him listen. He... brought two more of my men. They hung them up, like Mell... God, no, please... please... don't do this again. He was... arrogant... he... wanted me to... to... confess. I couldn't... couldn't... I am a Starfleet officer... He wanted... wanted... humiliation. He... wanted me... to deny... my oath... No, no... I can't... Then... then, my men will die. My fault... my responsibility... Life is... sacred. Life is... but I... I can't... I can't deny... deny life... carnage... lives... in exchange... for a confession..."

"All right! All right... I'll make the tape! Oh God, I'll do it. But he said... no. He said it was... too late. He wouldn't listen to reason... I tried to explain... What kind of monster is he? He wouldn't listen. He only wanted to torture. There must be some way I can reach him. Does he have no sense of... feeling... no humanity? He is not human. He is the animal."

"The guards began cutting... cutting into Wyman... no... Dave... Landers... stop this! I tried to get up... he said... he didn't want my confession. He turned away. Ghi... listen... listen!"

... "All right -- I'll make your tape! Ghi -- listen! I'll confess!"

The Anthranian supervised the fastening of the two chosen victims to the poles. He pointedly ignored Kirk's call.

Kirk struggled with his guards. "What GOOD will this do? Kill us all and you'll have nothing!"

Ghi faced him with a feral grin on his face. "I have nothing now, Captain. You are all nothing."

Kirk tried to reach for him, was held back. "Ghi -- stop this! I'll make your tape if you promise --"

Ghi slammed his hand across Kirk's face. Kirk fell, sprawled on the ground. He struggled to rise.

"You had your chance. You've lost your right to bargain," Ghi shouted. "Now is too late." He signalled the guards to begin on Wyman and Landers.

"No!" Kirk was screaming. "You can't do this -- we are Starfleet officers -- I'll give you a tape -- our government..."

Knives were making shallow cuts on the two men. A guard pulled Kirk's head around to see it. Ghi stepped in front of him.

"You don't mean to confess. This is a trick," he declared.

"No -- trick! No -- games! I swear." Kirk was on his knees, still struggling to rise.

"I no longer want or need your confession. I have orders to kill you all." Ghi turned his back on Kirk, walking slowly toward the poles.

Kirk's vision blurred; he thought he was going to pass out. In front of him, the guards still teased with the knives. Thin bloody rivulets ran down both men. Wyman's eyes met his in mute terror and agony...

Kirk was on his knees, clutching his stomach, trying to breathe as the words tore from his throat. Beside him, McCoy wrapped his arms around the heaving shoulders.

"Do something, Doctor." Spock's voice was strained, his face colorless; hands were clenched into fists at his side in an effort to keep them from trembling. The Vulcan's eyes were wild as they focused on the sight of his Captain doubled to his knees in agony. "Help him."

Tears of compassion tumbled from the blue eyes. "Not yet, Spock. Let him get this out."

Kirk was not listening to them. He went on, broken words running together. "I... managed to stand. I pulled away from the guards... had to reach him... had to make him stop... then I ... I slipped... my leg... hurt... I slipped... and fell... couldn't stand... the ground was wet... and red. Blood... oh God, Mell's blood... all over... pieces of his body... all over... please... my responsibility... "

... Kirk struggled to his feet, scuttled, limping toward Ghi. "In the name of WHATEVER is sacred to you -- you can't do this! PLEASE... stop! I'll make your tape -- I'll confess! Listen to me -- we WERE spying! I'll say what you want -- I'll..." Close to the poles, Kirk's foot slipped in a puddle of Mell Travis' blood. His leg collapsed and he fell hard, face-down in the sticky red substance. Near his cheek, a mound of unidentifiable flesh gleamed wetly. Kirk recoiled, screaming in panic...

Kirk clutched at his head. "Something -- inside -- snapped. I could feel it. It was dark and cold and I... Please! Let me confess! Listen to me -- please -- Oh God, we were sent to spy! Stop this -- please -- no -- don't -- please -- please..." He writhed as McCoy held him firmly, stilling his motions with gentle words.

"Shh... easy, Jim. It's all right... all right, we're here..."

"Blood -- everywhere -- blood and... I begged him... I... and he... mocked me... I... crawled... crawled to him... begging ... please let me confess... I ... must... save my men. The price is too high... He said, 'look at you now, animal.' Yes, animal... crawling like an animal... not a man... I am... nothing... I have... nothing... deserve... nothing... I'm lost... have lost... dreams are lost... I survive... survive to... I... he won... he still wouldn't listen... Stop... please... Oh God, stop this. It can't go on. I... grabbed his leg... please... he... kicked me... What more do you want? Anything... anything..."

... Ghi whirled around just in time to see Kirk fall. The Captain's blood-stained body jackknifed, then he crawled forward, babbling incoherently to the Anthranian. His face, covered with blood and dirt, was streaked with tears as he implored Ghi for mercy. Ghi stopped his advance with a deliberately placed foot.

"Look at you NOW, Captain. Crawling to me on your belly through the blood of your crew. You despicable animal -- proving your cowardice and inferiority. Shall I take pity on you, poor little wretch, and put you out of your misery? Cry, Captain Kirk, cry for your precious Federation."

Kirk clutched at Ghi's leg, trying to pull himself up. "I'll tell you anything -- ANY--THING -- what do you WANT from me? Just -- call off these murders!"

Ghi pulled his leg free, roughly booting Kirk back to the ground. He turned to the posts. "Stop that!" he commanded in Anthranian. "And -- " he indicated Kirk's huddled figure, "bring this one inside."

"... James Kirk... crawling on his belly... begging... like... like... I have lost... command..."

McCoy shot a hypospray of sedative against Kirk's arm as Spock held him still. Kirk was incoherent, trying to pull away from them, whimpering.

"C'mon, Jim -- snap out of it!" McCoy shouted, fear sharpening his voice. Kirk convulsed in the shock of total recall, seemingly not aware of where he was. McCoy experienced a moment of panic, trying to cope with a situation which suddenly seemed beyond his ability. Then he forced himself to detach his personal involvement. He was the doctor and Jim was his patient. He wiped his eyes, drew in a breath as his professional attitude once more fell into place.

Spock clung to the flailing human, terrified by Kirk's mental agony, positive that McCoy had gone too far this time and they had lost Kirk completely. His head pounded, anxiety tied his stomach in knots. His concern projected itself in protectiveness, as if he could somehow shield Kirk from himself, from the memories too horrible to bear.

Gradually, as the drug took effect, Kirk quieted. The Vulcan lifted the trembling human into his arms and carried him to the sofa.

"...ohgod... Spock... don't. I..." Kirk moaned.

"Be silent!" Spock ordered, his voice ragged. Gently, he deposited Kirk on the sofa and sat beside him. McCoy bent over them, resting a hand on Spock's shoulder.

"Just rest now," Spock instructed, ignoring McCoy, trying to block out the doctor's presence. For a brief, illogical moment he regretted having sent for McCoy, having brought him here to do this to Kirk. Then, reason won out and he looked up at McCoy for some sign of guidance.

McCoy had recovered his own assurance. Any man who had survived such an incident as Kirk described was surely strong enough to survive the telling of it. He was counting on that, and on Kirk's own iron will to bring him out of this. He breathed deeply and forced his voice to sound calm.

"He's all right -- aren't you, Jim? It's over now, boy. It's all right."

Kirk sat up, resting against the arm of the sofa. His fingers clenched and unclenched around Spock's hand, but he could not look up, could not meet their faces. The drug took away his panic, he felt its warmth, but the chill was so deep that it still commanded him. He began to talk again, more calmly yet still as if compelled to do so.

"They... they told me afterward that I made a tape right then. I... guess I did, but the real tape -- the one they released -- was made later. I... remember... they tied me up... ropes around my chest and arms. I was... in a dark little room... like the solitary, I guess. It's not clear..."

"What were you thinking about then, Jim? What were you feeling?" McCoy prompted.

"Thinking...? Nothing. It was dark and... I was alone... and I didn't think... didn't feel... I... ceased to be." Kirk shivered.

"How long were you there?" McCoy asked.

"I don't know... a couple of hours, maybe. A day. Then they took me out and told me the tape had to be done over. I... did it. But... I was no longer James T. Kirk." Kirk's voice grew chill, detached, as if he remembered that schism of self.

McCoy leaned forward, facing Kirk in a position from which Kirk had to look at him. "Jim, I've read the transcripts from the other prisoners. They all agree. After they took you from

the courtyard, it was a week before you were returned."

Kirk was surprised, then confused. "It was that long? I... don't remember..." He looked away, down at his hand still on Spock's.

"And when you came out -- " McCoy went on, "that's when the man Jim Kirk stopped existing. Don't you see, now, what happened? Your mind healed its scars by covering them over. To give that confession was to admit that you were no longer the person whom you had been. You had to deny your identity. You had to submerge your breakdown in order to go on, to continue functioning and to do what you knew had to be done. And that breakdown had to be faced before true healing could begin."

McCoy's explanation was too intense to be understood by Kirk at that moment. Suddenly, he realized that it was over; it was all out. He had, at their determined insistence, relived that final degradation and humiliation. He had held back nothing, colored nothing, and yet they were still here, supporting, explaining, helping. A warmth suffused him, banishing the chill. He pressed his eyes shut.

"You're worn out," McCoy observed, chastizing himself for his own eagerness and insistence. "Close your eyes and rest for a while."

Kirk attempted a protest. "No, Bones... I... "

"Jim," Spock's voice was firm. "Enough! Whatever must be discussed can wait."

"Look," McCoy berated softly. "You can barely stay awake. That's it -- relax."

As Kirk slipped quietly into a light sleep, McCoy straightened. His muscles pulled and he realized his own tenseness and pain. Abruptly, he looked over at Spock, remembering the Vulcan's recent injury. Spock was still, watching Kirk with a dogged persistence.

At the liquor cabinet, McCoy filled two glasses and returned to the sofa. "Here, Spock --" he extended one to the Vulcan. "I think we both need this." Spock stared skeptically at the drink as he accepted the glass. "That's a medical prescription, Spock -- unless you'd rather have an intravenous drug," McCoy suggested.

Spock obeyed reluctantly, and took a hesitant sip of the liquid. Then, abruptly, he drained the glass in one fierce swallow.

"Hey -- easy with that stuff!" McCoy reproached, surprised by Spock's unusual action. Damn Vulcan never did know how to drink, he mused. More than anything, it indicated Spock's present state of mind. Sympathetically, he patted the Vulcan's shoulder.

Briefly, he checked the sleeping Kirk, then motioned Spock to follow him out of the room. They went into the kitchen.

"Here -- sit down," McCoy insisted, pulling out a chair for Spock. "You don't look very well."

Trembling, Spock took the seat without argument, although he raised an eyebrow at McCoy's fussing. His head was pounding yet he refused to acknowledge the pain. As McCoy reached for a mediscanner, Spock tightened his grip on the brandy glass which he was still holding.

The sudden, brittle sound of breaking glass startled McCoy. He confronted the Vulcan anxiously.

"Spock! What in the hell are you -- " he began. Spock was regarding his own hand with some amazement. Thin streaks of green were beginning to well up. Wordlessly, McCoy took the injured hand between his own and examined the surface cuts. "The last thing we need around here is another accident," he mumbled, knowing the innocent bluster would ease the Vulcan's anxiety. Gently, he treated the cuts, finishing with a spray bandage. Spock, silent through the ministrations, finally spoke.

"I... do not know how to... help him."

The plaintive words surprised McCoy, forcing his thoughts in another direction. "What? Of course you do. You've been helping all along. You..."

Spock rose. "I have tried -- to give, to assist. But I would... shield him from this... this anguish."

McCoy sighed and sat in the seat Spock had vacated. "So would I, Spock. I hate doing this, hate -- "

"That word rather sums up everything," Spock observed quietly. It was a shocking admission from one of Vulcan heritage. McCoy went to him.

"No. The one word that says it all is... love. Not hate. Over, above and beyond all the torment and horror, there's one force which motivates us. Spock, today proved it more than ever. Jim trusted us with something he was unable to trust even to himself. What name do you put on that? It's more powerful than the hate we feel toward the monsters who controlled Jim."

Spock was silent, considering. McCoy touched his shoulder. "For the first time, Spock, I feel positive that we're going to make it. We've won the battle and the armistice is ready to be signed. The Anties are the losers. They've finally given Jim Kirk back to us. So, c'mon, bheer up." He nodded his head in the direction of the living area. "He deserves it. He earned it."

Kirk slept for nearly an hour. It was a dreamless, drug-induced sleep, and when he woke he felt disoriented for a moment, unable to identify his surroundings. Then he saw Spock sitting in a chair across from the sofa, and it all came flooding back. McCoy had wanted to know, kept hammering at him and finally he had brought it all out, told them all the gory details, had re-lived that day on Anthrania when James T. Kirk, starship captain, had spilled his guts to a slimy, Klingon-supported barbarian. He had believed then that it was necessary to save the lives of his men, and maybe that was true. In any event, no more had been killed and they had been released. Whether or not it was worth it didn't seem important any more. What Kirk knew was that Ghi had exacted the measure of the man that day, and that James Kirk had paid the price he demanded.

He had tried to push it down, pretend it hadn't happened. He had refused to examine what it had cost him to crawl, begging, to Ghi. McCoy had changed all that. McCoy had forced him to remember, to reopen old agonies only half-healed and cleverly concealed by time. Kirk tested a new idea and found that he could remember all the details of what he had felt that day and that, ironically, the remembering didn't hurt quite as much as he had been afraid it would. He had said it all, put it into words and he was still here, functioning, reasoning. What would happen now, he didn't know, but somehow he felt encouraged... and very, very tired.

He looked up at Spock. The Vulcan's head was turned and Kirk had a chance to observe him. Spock was thin, drawn, apparently recovered from his recent injuries, yet Kirk knew that worry and concern had made slow the return to Spock's normal, healthy self. Kirk smiled affectionately. *When I'm all right again, he will be... It will happen, Spock, I promise you.*

Quietly, he spoke his friend's name. Spock turned and some of the lines faded from his face as he met the tenderly shining eyes.

"You are awake so soon. How do you feel?"

Kirk yawned. "Still a little sleepy, I think, but rested. How long was I out?"

"Not quite an hour."

"Ohh..." Kirk made no comment on the Vulcan's vague measure of time, but it bothered him. "That's long enough." He raised himself on his elbows, still feeling the effects of

the sedative.

"That's not necessary," Spock said. "Why don't you try to sleep a little longer?"

"No, I don't think so." Kirk was studying the Vulcan's face. "Are you all right?"

"Yes, Jim."

Kirk shook his head. "I mean, really."

"Do not concern yourself about me. Dr. McCoy assures me I am quite recovered."

"Where is he?"

"I believe the doctor was feeling rather fatigued. He said he was going to take a 'cat-nap' while you were asleep. Shall I call him?"

"No, let him rest," Kirk answered quickly. "I guess we could all do with some rest after our... talk... this morning. Are you sure you're all right?"

"Jim... "

"Okay, never mind," Kirk smiled. He rubbed the back of his neck. "Whew... those sedatives really give you a hangover."

"You were rather agitated," Spock had a penchant for understatement. "McCoy felt you needed something to help you relax."

"Yes, I know... I didn't mean to say so... much. I mean... once I started talking... remembering... it just sort of all... came." Kirk grimaced.

"Don't talk about it now," Spock cautioned. Kirk hung his head. So, Spock couldn't bear to hear about it.

"I'm sorry. I wanted to spare you that. I didn't want you to know... to know what I had done. You were never supposed to... "

Pain etched the Vulcan features. "It is not that... not me," he assured hastily. "What you had to endure... there is no need to think about it at this time."

Kirk was silent, sensing Spock's discomfort, yet misinterpreting the cause. He accepted it as another guilt to bear, realizing how he had hurt Spock by showing him the depths to which he had sunk on Anthranis. Spock would have to deal with the truth about his Captain. It was one of the peripheral agonies, knowing he had failed in Spock's eyes. Kirk would not accept sympathy, edged with disappointment, from his friend.

"I couldn't see a choice at the time, Spock," he tried to explain. "I wanted... needed to save their lives. He was going to torture them, kill them... "

"He is a monster." The quiet fury in the Vulcan's words sent a chill through Kirk. His peaceful, compassionate Vulcan was a picture of controlled rage, and the sight terrified him. He remembered a similar tense, trembling moment when Parmen had almost forced Spock to kill him.

"Yes, he is, Spock." Kirk made his voice steady, to project for Spock a calm he didn't feel. "And I could have killed him... then. Now, it's over and I... I have to face what I did."

"You did what you had to do."

"You don't really believe that." Kirk had to voice it. "I should have held out, honored the oath I took... "

"And allowed each of your men to die?"

"There are worse things."

"Captain," Spock sought Kirk's eyes. "Life is sacred. You have lived believing this. It is one of the characteristics that has made you an outstanding commander. You value all life, you place priority on beings over anything else."

Kirk was skeptical. "You can say that after... after hearing what took place... after knowing how I... "

"... Sacrificed your own dignity to save your crew," Spock cut in.

"Yes." The word was quiet, deflated.

Spock rose slowly and moved to sit on the couch. Kirk looked up immediately at the nearness of the Vulcan. Hesitantly, gently, Spock reached out to touch his face.

"Jim, if you had not confessed, had not done whatever had to be done to save their lives, then I could not have respected you, but I would not have doubted for a moment that you would, for that is what makes you the man you are."

Kirk wanted to believe; he met the honesty in the deep brown eyes and hope welled inside him. Could it be that Spock understood, supported him... that Spock approved of what he had done? *A long time ago, on a sleek silver bird... he remembered... 'A starship runs on loyalty -- to one man.'* Was it loyalty that made Spock say those things? Kirk was silent, studying the angular features. There was no sympathy, no confusion in them now. Spock meant what he said. It was more than loyalty -- Spock still respected him.

"Would you have... have crawled ... to Ghi... begged him to allow you to confess... to dishonor your Federation... to wallow in front of your men before a pig you despised...?" Kirk's voice was bitter with self-loathing.

Spock did not waver. He was thoughtful for a moment, then answered in quiet sincerity, "I am not certain that I would have had that courage, Captain."

Kirk sagged under the weight of Spock's admission. For so long he had valued his First Officer's judgment, relied on it in times of conflict. Now, to find that Spock could interpret his actions as courageous... when all he had felt was shame and humiliation... that aspect had not occurred to him. He had not felt courage that day on Anthrania, nor any day since. He could expect some kind of psychological interpretation in his favor from McCoy, but Spock's open, honest statement was not meant to bolster his self-esteem. There was no underlying motivation in Spock's words. It was simply an affirmation of what the Vulcan believed, felt. And if Spock reasoned that way...

"I don't think Ghi thought of the act as very courageous."

"That is because he does not understand humans."

Kirk smiled at that. "And you do, Mr. Spock?"

Spock returned the smile with his eyes, then grew serious again. "I believe I understand what it cost James Kirk to... degrade himself... in that manner."

Kirk sighed. "Yes, perhaps you do. You always seem to understand a great many things about me."

"Then trust what I say now."

"I want to, Spock. I want to find something positive to hang on to."

"Ask yourself this, then. Would you wish to place your life in the hands of a man not willing to make personal sacrifices to save it?" Kirk shook his head. "Jim, on the Enterprise, every man and woman gave you their best, pushed that extra measure for you because they knew that when their time came you would do the same for them. They trusted you, just as the men under your command on Anthrania trusted you. You did not let them down. You saved as many as you could, no matter what the personal cost."

"And what about those who died? What about Travis and Lomax and... "

"There are always casualties."

"Don't dismiss them so lightly, Mr. Spock. They were good men."

"I do not dismiss them lightly, Jim. But to count James Kirk as a casualty also, because of them -- that would be another tragedy."

Kirk leaned back and closed his eyes. "You make it all sound so simple. It wasn't that clear-cut."

"No, it is not simple," Spock agreed. "I did not even express what Ghi put you through. Even now, the mention of that name fills me with such a rage, I want to..." Spock clenched his fists. Kirk opened his eyes, concerned and frightened at the change in the Vulcan's mood.

"Spock, don't... please. He can't hurt us now. You're a Vulcan... don't let what he did to me hurt you so."

"If I had been there..."

"No! That's the one thing I'm thankful for, that you weren't there. Don't ever say that, think that. I couldn't have stood it if you were... they would have known... I couldn't have taken it if it had been you they... tortured. It was the one place where I did *not* want you at my side, Spock. I needed you here... to come home to."

Spock nodded. "And have you come home, Captain?"

"Soon, Spock... very soon, I think."

"Then we shall look forward to the day... for that is..." Spock's voice was very soft, "what I need."

Kirk reached out and closed his hand over Spock's. Neither man spoke for a while, each one content in the shared solitude. Kirk marvelled that this friend, so constant, could still see worth in him. He had believed that James Kirk was gone. Yet Spock had maintained that man still existed, held out for the man he knew, under whom he had served, with whom he had shared his life. Spock was determined to see that man again, no matter how much Kirk himself denied his existence. If Spock believed it, perhaps it was true. Perhaps he was not so changed as he had thought. He would discuss it later with Bones.

Kirk suddenly shivered as the combination of emotional ordeal and effects from the drug took their toll. The tremors increased involuntarily as Kirk unsuccessfully fought the reaction.

"What is it?" Spock was alarmed. "What is wrong?"

"I... I...d...don't... know. I c-c-can't seem to st-st-stop shaking." Kirk said. "I'm s-so c-c-cold."

Spock drew the trembling form into his arms, holding him, shielding him protectively, unable to resist the memory of the first night after Kirk's return from Anthrania, aching for all they had been through since then. His grip tightened as he felt Kirk's head drop to his shoulder, felt him consciously trying to relax.

"It m-must b-be some k-kind of a ... re-reaction," Kirk chattered.

"I will call McCoy," Spock suggested, yet reluctant to let go of his friend.

"N-no, it... will pass... it's be-ginning to go - go away... now." His breathing slowed, his eyes closed as he leaned against Spock.

"I believe you should try to sleep some more."

Kirk nodded. "Perhaps you're right." He lay in Spock's arms, felt himself slowly quieting. He was aware of a feather-like touch stroking his face. It was soothing and he sensed he was drifting toward sleep. Gently, he disentangled himself and sat up, his eyelids still half-closed.

"I'm better now. I think I will try to sleep a little." He smiled sheepishly. "Thank you, Spock... for your... mnh, help."

Spock stood to allow Kirk to lie down on the couch. "My pleasure, Captain, I assure you," he answered, a light, teasing tone to his voice as he pulled a cover over the dozing man. Kirk caught his eye with an amused, half-asleep twinkle.

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The three men rested for a while, each in his own manner remembering and accepting the ordeal they had shared.

Captain James T. Kirk had lived through it on Anthrania, but in a beach cottage on Banoc-160, Commander Spock and Doctor Leonard McCoy had lived through it, too. Their empathy, their concern, their love for the captain had exposed them to the horrors of Ghi's tortures and through his words, Kirk had made it a reality for them. They, too, suffered Anthrania, saw it all, felt it all -- and survived. Now, three battered souls were seeking, finding strength to build, to heal.

When Kirk finally awoke, evening was beginning to drift across the ocean and he found his two friends contemplating a spectacular sunset from chairs outside the front of the house. Feeling more steady than he had in a long time, Kirk joined them.

"You know," McCoy greeted him, "I never noticed how beautiful the sunsets are here."

"Could be you've had other things on your mind," Kirk suggested.

McCoy nodded. "Guess so. How do you feel, Jim?"

Kirk felt Spock's eyes on him and he met the Vulcan's gaze as he answered. "Like a man who's been to hell and back... and then had a good sleep."

"You rested four point two hours," Spock told him.

"Thank you, Mr. Spock." Kirk grinned. "Well, looks like we're all a bunch of lazy-bones around here," he said pointedly. McCoy groaned at the pun. Kirk sank into the vacant chair beside him. "Did you rest well, Doctor?"

"I caught a cat-nap," McCoy said gruffly. "Then I came out here, found Spock, and he's been chewin' my ear off for a couple of hours."

Spock was abashed. "Doctor, I assure you, I have in no way indulged in such a... "

"Never mind," Kirk cut in, laughing at the easy, natural banter of his friends. His laughter was contagious; McCoy joined him, giggling over the nonsensical picture of Spock "chewing" on anyone's ear. The Vulcan raised an indignant eyebrow at the two out-of-control humans, but the corners of his mouth softened into something close to a grin.

Kirk wiped at his eyes, finally exhausted and out of breath as he and McCoy labored to suppress their chuckles. He leaned back in the reclining chair drained, happy.

"Thank you," he said softly, his eyes meeting McCoy's with tenderness. McCoy reached out and covered his hand with his own.

"We're not home yet," he said quietly. "We made a giant step today, but we still have a little way to go."

"I understand that," Kirk assured. Then, suddenly, he got to his feet. "But before I tackle another long journey, I'm hungry and I intend to eat. Do either of you gentlemen care to join me?"

McCoy stood. "You know, we *have* missed a meal somewhere. C'mon, Spock. Okay, Jim, lead the way to the kitchen."

Lead the way... and we'll follow. And that's the way it will be again, Jim.

Dinner was a satisfying occasion. Spock's appetite improved as he watched Kirk eat with an enthusiasm he had not observed in weeks. Afterward, they filled out the evening hours with talk and quiet activities, although Kirk was restless and around midnight, he suggested they go for a swim. His two friends finally agreed, knowing they would get no rest if they refused. He was in that kind of mood. It was early morning, just a few hours before dawn, when they finally retired to their rooms.

Kirk couldn't sleep, although it was not the tormented wakefulness of previous nights. His mind was racing, sorting out things which McCoy and Spock had said, examining feelings he had buried for too long. It was as though a dark, heavy load had been lifted, shedding light on all their recent conversations. And with the light came questions, innuendoes, statements, a dozen half-formed thoughts to which Kirk was now eager to learn the answers. He drifted off to sleep at last, still speculating, still making plans, as outside the morning sun was beginning to climb toward its zenith. His last conscious thought was that when he returned to the Enterprise, he was going to have to learn to change his sleeping habits.

Later in the day, after the men had risen and enjoyed a leisurely brunch, Kirk was glad when Spock announced that he wanted to spend some time working on his collection. Though Kirk's need to speak alone with McCoy was great, he had realized how much Spock had needed to be with them. That the Vulcan had offered on his own to leave them for a while relieved Kirk and showed him that Spock was relaxing now, too.

Spock closeted himself in the den with his samples, porta-comp and a file that indicated he was ready for hours of concentrated effort. Kirk turned to McCoy.

"Feel like walking, Bones?"

"I suppose I could use the exercise. Did you have any particular place in mind?" He noticed Kirk's continuing restlessness.

"There's an old abandoned lighthouse a few miles up the beach that dates back to the days of this planet's sailing ships. I've seen it from the cliff and heard some residents mention it, but I've never gotten around to going there. I'd really like to explore it. Besides, I want to talk to you."

McCoy smiled. "I thought maybe you would." He was pleased at the way Kirk seemed to be making decisions, planning positive actions and this was the first time since his arrival that it was the captain who had suggested they talk. "Give me a chance to change into my walking clothes and I'll be right with you."

The lighthouse was reminiscent of its old Terran counterparts -- a tall, cylindrical shaped building housing the huge watch-light at the top. Kirk and McCoy clambored over the rocks that lead out to the lighthouse. Although it had long been abandoned, it had been soundly constructed and had weathered the decades well. Kirk climbed the interior stairway to the top, enjoying a sense of adventure and nostalgia -- a unique camaraderie with those ancient sea captains who relied on lights like this one as a warning or a greeting much as

Kirk relied on his ship's sensors.

Kirk's interest was contagious and even McCoy was caught up in recalling sailing stories from his boyhood days. They poked around for a while, then Kirk led the way outside and headed for an outcropping of rock that jutted over the sea. He found a place to sit, facing the ocean, and waited while McCoy settled on a rock nearby. Then he turned to face the doctor.

"Spock should have come with us. He would love this place." Kirk's voice was thoughtful.

"Perhaps another time he'll have a chance to come. I think he was anxious to work on his precious shells today."

"He did seem quite... happy," Kirk grinned. Then his voice sobered. "It's just as well he didn't come. I wanted to talk to you alone."

McCoy nodded. "You have some questions."

"Yes, lots of them. I feel... I don't know. I didn't sleep much last night. I kept going over what happened yesterday... things you said... Spock said... and I don't understand..." His voice became vague.

"Anything in particular, Jim?"

"Well, it's like I've been through some kind of purging -- by fire or... water -- and everything has to be affected by it. But I look in the mirror and the face is still the same. You and Spock are still the same. The ocean out there keeps on rolling, the sun came up this morning... so, what's different? I mean, *something* has happened, but what? Does that make any sense, or has James Kirk finally gone that last mile and you're ready to certify me for occupancy on the nearest rehab colony?"

McCoy smiled. "Not just yet," he assured. "I do understand what you're feeling and it's exactly what I expected."

"Glad to know I'm so predictable," Kirk said sourly. McCoy ignored the barb.

"You faced what you've kept hidden from yourself. You brought it out in the open, examined it, re-lived it, but it was so emotionally draining that you've not been able to analyse what it means yet. You kept it locked away, certain that it could not be allowed to surface, and your consciousness was convinced that if it was ever released, it would destroy you. Yet it *was* released, you survived it a second time, but your mind still hasn't had a chance to realize that you're still functioning, that, as you put it, the ocean keeps rolling, the sun comes up..."

"You said something to me yesterday," Kirk went on, thoughtful. "I've been trying to make sense out of it. You said that when I came out of solitary... after I made the confession... you said, '...that's when the man, James Kirk, stopped existing.' I was pretty emotionally drained when you said it and I think I was only half listening, but later, last night, I remembered it and it doesn't make sense."

"In what way?" McCoy was cautious. If this were the point Kirk was questioning, then perhaps the road home would not be as long as he feared. Kirk had hit on the crux of his problem.

"I kept telling you I'd changed, that I was not the same man I was before, yet you and Spock kept insisting I had not changed that much. You almost had me convinced. Spock thinks I'm the same man I was. But now, I remember you saying that Jim Kirk stopped existing. Damn, Bones, who am I?"

McCoy took a breath. "Essentially, both statements are true. Everything we do in our lives, all of our experiences affect us. We do change -- every day, every year, in small ways, in our outlooks, our reasoning, our ability to interpret. You are not the same man who left the Enterprise a year ago and spent ten months in an Anthranian prison camp. Your experiences there did contribute to James Kirk, to the man who came back and will go on from here. It is a part of your life now, just as are your years at the Academy, your tours on

other ships, your assignment as Captain of the Enterprise. It has to be accounted for as part of your life-experience and it will influence your thinking, your attitudes, just as those other experiences do. So, in as much as it has become part of your... education, if you will, you have been changed by things you learned on Anthrania.

"But while you, me, Spock, everyone is changed by these outer influences, there is an essence -- call it the soul of a man -- that is much more difficult to change, therefore less affected by things that seem to happen to us. The essence of James Kirk, the man who left the Enterprise, is still the same. The basic goodness, the logic, the intelligence, the bit of a rascal, the drive, determination -- all those things that make you who you are -- the positive things and the negatives you saw that time the transporter malfunctioned -- those things are basically the same." McCoy paused, giving Kirk time to consider what he said.

"Then, why is it so hard for me to accept what I did -- why the... mental block, the black-outs when it came to admitting that I made the tape? I know I did it, I acknowledge I did it, yet when I tried to remember... to talk about it, it was like a door slamming and I was terrified to open it."

"Because you didn't acknowledge how you felt about it -- couldn't, until yesterday, when you were forced to make it happen, in this reality, all over again. Look, it was such an ordeal for you, the torture, the humiliation, the horror of seeing your men mutilated, that the combination of all these things finally reached a point where you could take it no longer. I must add that you held out, fought back, hung on longer than any man would have been expected to under the circumstances. That's why GHI insisted upon the most severe kind of degradation for you. You were a challenge, an impossible steel wall he had to break -- and *he* had all the odds in his favor. The outcome was inevitable because you *are* the man you are, and your own strength of will made it harder for you. There should be no shame, no guilt in what you did -- and I think you are finally beginning to realize that."

"Spock believes that, too," Kirk said quietly.

"Of course, because it's true. The problem comes from yourself, from what you expect of yourself. James Kirk has to be infallible. It's part of your character, Jim. You drive yourself harder than any other man, you will not allow for human failings in yourself. You believe you should be able to endure more than anyone possibly could. And because of this self-image, you were convinced that James Kirk would not, could not break. But you, my friend, like all other mortals, do have that breaking point. When you reached it and knew that you had, a new, different being popped up and would not allow you to accept it. Therefore, if James Kirk would not break, would not make that confession tape, then it had to be someone else who did."

Kirk was incredulous. "What? You mean I'm schizophrenic, like two people? Not that again!"

"No," McCoy corrected. "It's not schizophrenia, Jim. In the week following the incident in the courtyard, you were confined to solitary. At that point you were so emotionally distraught that you weren't even aware of your surroundings, or how much time was passing. GHI knew that by removing you from the rest of your men, who may have been able to bolster you, give you support, he was allowing you to withdraw into yourself, blame yourself, with no one to try to convince you otherwise. You might have gone completely mad in that week, you were that close to the edge, but your own will to survive was stronger and your mind erected a shield for you to live with. You became convinced that the man you had been no longer existed for *he* would not have broken and what emerged was a James Kirk whom you believed was so changed that you couldn't go back to the life you had known, to your career, to your place as captain of the Enterprise."

Kirk sat still for a moment, only half-believing, half-understanding McCoy's words. At last he let out a breath. "If what you say is true, then all the things I've believed about myself are a lie and I don't know who I am anymore."

McCoy gave an exasperated sigh. "Jim, if I didn't know you better, I'd think you were being deliberately obtuse or stubborn. There you go again, being super-critical of yourself. Remember, I said we all learn from our experiences. One of the things that you learned on Anthrania -- if you will just ease up on yourself long enough to see it -- is that you're not infallible. Just like any other man, you have your weaknesses, your breaking points."

That's not wrong, it's just human nature."

"I never believed I was perfect," Kirk said angrily. "I've admitted to doubts, insecurities..."

"Yes, you admit to them," McCoy interrupted. "And you see them as character flaws, so you constantly strive harder than most other men to overcome them -- harder than necessary."

"You can't command a starship if you're full of fears and uncertainties. My job demands that I make decisions..."

"And if you make the wrong one -- or even if you *feel* it's wrong -- you suffer for it, you feel guilt, blame yourself. I know. That's where your compassion comes in, and that's another plus that makes you an exceptional leader -- and an exceptional human being."

"I'm glad to know I have some plusses in your opinion, Doctor," Kirk said sarcastically.

"I won't even dignify that remark with a comment," McCoy snapped. "Understand this: you made a decision on Anthrania -- conscious or otherwise -- to save your men. It involved sacrifices and you were willing to make them. The decision you made was the right one -- the only one, and damn it, Jim, you *know* that -- you've got to believe it. So the guilt, the blame that you're feeling just doesn't exist!"

Kirk turned his face away. "Bones, how can I reconcile what I did?"

McCoy reached out and took him by the shoulders, turning him around to face him again. "Because you have to," he said gently. "Because it's necessary for your sanity, for your future, just as what you did -- making the confession -- was necessary to save those men on Anthrania. And because that same will to survive that got you through that ordeal will give you the strength to accept this. Jim, it isn't easy for any man to learn these things about himself, but it may make things less difficult for you in the future. You've come this far, don't build up those barriers again."

Kirk smiled. "I've come this far with you... and Spock. I couldn't have, alone."

McCoy returned the smile. "No, you couldn't have. This was a three-man operation."

"Because you believed in me, stuck with me..."

"Then, return the trust," McCoy said. "Believe in us, in our faith in you, but most of all, believe in yourself."

Kirk grinned. "You drive a hard bargain, Doctor."

"That's because I think the results are worth it... don't you?"

"Yes, I do." The voice was quiet. McCoy squeezed his shoulder.

They sat for a while, neither speaking, watching the ocean waves and some playful animals cavorting in the water. Presently, Kirk broke the silence.

"Bones, let's get back to the house. We've left Spock alone long enough."

"He probably hasn't even missed us," McCoy grumbled. "You know how involved he gets when he's working on something."

"You're right, still..."

"Still, we should go back," McCoy finished. He understood the look in Kirk's eyes. Spock was so much a part of Kirk's catharsis, and right now the Captain needed the security that the Vulcan's presence provided. "All right, Jim. Let's go."

Kirk stood up. "I still have a lot of questions, Bones."

"We'll take them one at a time," McCoy promised.

"But it's beginning to fit together."

"That's what we planned all along."

Kirk grinned. "We're quite a team. Bet we could do great things on a starship."

"I'll lay you odds," McCoy countered.

"Naww... Wouldn't be any fun. I have a feeling the deck's stacked in our favor," Kirk decided.

"And you hold all the aces, Captain."

Kirk threw him a quick look. "Ah, but you're a master at bluffing, McCoy."

"Look who's talking." McCoy braced himself for the shove he knew would come.

In the days that followed, Kirk's confidence in himself, his ability to cope with the past, grew almost hourly. As McCoy had agreed, one by one they tackled the questions and doubts that still rose to threaten the tentative grip on stability they had achieved. With the whole story of Anthrania released, understood, shared, there were no more dark corners where Kirk feared to go. Once the worst had been told, progress had to be steadily upward from that point.

Yet understanding and accepting his part in the confession was only a portion of the anxieties left over from the whole ill-fated mission. Kirk no longer doubted his ability to return to the command of his ship. Whether or not the desire to do so still existed was another source of conflict. If he could justify his own actions, dispel his own guilt, then perhaps he could also reach a viable conclusion about the Federation's failure to intercede and effect a rescue. The worrisome thoughts about Starfleet's impersonal, computerized attitude, their neat ways of categorizing and explaining away inconsistencies, or questioning the loyalty and integrity of the Federation toward their own people, sounded treasonous even to Kirk's ears. The Federation was the largest, most powerful force for good in the galaxy, and Starfleet was its military-diplomatic representative. Their way was persuasion -- not force, freedom -- not suppression, dedicated to the benefit of all people. How often had he not recited those very creeds himself, believing them to be true, placing his personal code of ethics side by side with the honor of the establishment he served.

Now, because of Anthrania, that loyalty had been shaken and because it cut so deep into the basics of his beliefs, Kirk could not accept his feeling of betrayal. It almost seemed sacrilege to voice doubts this deep, this sincere, and Kirk sought a way to reconstruct the shattered web of allegiance. If he were to return to Starfleet, his dedication had to be as positive as before, but right now that 'if' was still a big obstacle in his path. Time for overcoming that problem was slipping away, but in the meanwhile, he could find solace in the companionship of his friends, savoring their togetherness, assured in their support.

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"Here, Bones - let me help you with that," Kirk offered, taking one of the packages with which McCoy was struggling. Spock climbed out of the aircar's pilot seat and helped them with the unloading. Kirk laughed.

"Just how do you expect to get this all back to the ship, Doctor? Plan on returning in a barge?"

McCoy surveyed the products of their shopping trip. "Guess I did get a mite carried away," he admitted.

"I'll say!" Kirk balanced a carton on one shoulder and headed toward the cottage. McCoy hurried to keep pace with Kirk's strides and to justify his indulgence.

"When I left the ship, though, everybody needed something. They all marched on Sickbay like Grant's army to Richmond, and every item they wanted was vitally necessary," he defended, remembering his own confusion and worry, anxious to get to Kirk, yet unable to tell anyone on the ship where he was going. They hadn't suspected the true reason for his sudden departure, and had teased him about having a good time.

"As necessary as this case of Scotch?" Kirk grinned, lowering the box to the table. "C'mon, Bones. You're a soft touch and you know it."

McCoy smiled, embarrassed. "To tell you the truth, I forgot all about their requests until yesterday," he admitted.

Spock struggled through the door with the last of the packages and caught the end of their conversation. "I would think," he commented, "that you've been somewhat occupied."

Kirk rummaged through the parcel he accepted from Spock. "What's this?" He held up a neatly wrapped square box.

"Oh -- that's something I picked up for Pavel. To honor his... but, you don't *know*, do you?" McCoy exclaimed.

"Know what?" Kirk looked at Spock, but the Vulcan merely shrugged.

"His promotion went through -- right after you two left the ship. It's *Lieutenant* Chekov, now."

Kirk smiled in delight, then looked away, sobering. "Well. Things change, don't they?" he ventured awkwardly, trying to sound pleased.

"He deserves it, Jim," McCoy assured. "Chekov's learned quite a bit since you left."

"I'm sure." Kirk paced restlessly. "A year... it's been over a year," he fretted. "God, I've never really considered... To me, it's as if I just left, as if I've been in a time warp. I keep forgetting that life went on..." He stopped, uncomfortably silent.

"Not that much has changed," Spock pointed out. "You saw that for yourself when you returned from Anthrania."

Kirk faced him and smiled ruefully. "I wasn't exactly functioning at peak efficiency at that time," he reminded. "And being a... passenger... it's not the same as being in command. I'm not sure that I can just step back in..."

"Of course you can," McCoy affirmed.

"Oh, hell -- it's academic, anyway," Kirk refuted, turning away. "I don't have any guarantee that Starfleet will even consider returning me to the Enterprise..."

"I can give you that guarantee, Captain," Spock said emphatically. "Command was left open -- a temporary replacement was found. I was assured..."

Kirk sighed. "Yeah. Starfleet's good at assurances -- promises. So long as it doesn't interfere with their schemes."

"You still feel that they betrayed you," McCoy observed.

"Shouldn't I? I can't forget what they made us go through, that they sat by and did

nothing while we suffered."

"That is not entirely true," Spock denied, his voice quiet.

"Oh, I know, Spock. I know some people tried to secure our release. I know how hard *you* worked. But in the end, it was only my... my confession which saved us."

"Was it?" McCoy countered. "What makes you think that the Federation was bound to honor that confession? You capitulated -- they capitulated. They didn't have to. They could have gone on denying their involvement, told the Anties that you were lying, rejected the accusations. It would've preserved their image -- but you'd be dead."

Kirk seemed to consider McCoy's words, then, abruptly, he returned to the pile of packages on the table. "Okay, Bones. They're all nice, honorable men and women. Let's get these things put away."

McCoy refused to change the subject. "No, they're not all nice, honorable people. Some are real bastards. You're perfectly justified in feeling bitter. Spock and I agree with you, for all the good that's going to do any of us."

Kirk turned around to look at him, suspicious. "Yet you defend them -- support their position..."

"Perhaps I can hate what happened, hate what they did, but still look at it more objectively than you. Sure, there were too many delays, too much damned red tape to cut through, but we're dealing with *people*, Jim. People just like you and me. The system is fallible, needs some major overhauling, and maybe some changes will come. But in the meantime..."

"In the meantime, I was a victim of circumstances, is that what you're saying?" Kirk asked sharply. Then, seeing McCoy's distress, he softened. "Look, I'm not angry with you. I know you're trying to live with it the same as I am. But you're right -- I can't be objective about it."

"Jim -- " Spock came to his side. "In ten days you must face Starfleet Command again. They shall expect you to be prepared to resume your position within the organization. You must be certain..."

McCoy glanced at the Vulcan, wondering. If Jim decided to resign, would Spock follow him? Would the Science Officer give up his own career, his comfortable niche on the Enterprise? McCoy had seen Spock struggling under the strain of the past year without Kirk, knew what the two men meant to each other. Yes, he decided sadly, Spock would throw it all away, if it became necessary.

And how, McCoy thought, do I really feel? Am I justifying the wrongs out of a sense of self-preservation? No. If Jim can't cope with Starfleet, can't return to his former life, then I've failed -- the whole damned therapy goes down the drain, because right now, he would only be running away, hiding his head in the sand.

As McCoy pondered the subject, he caught a brief, visual exchange that passed between the Captain and his First Officer, an unspoken communication of understanding, and he knew that Jim had drawn the same conclusion concerning Spock. It was unsettling to watch the intimacy between them, and McCoy looked away.

"All right, Spock," he heard Kirk saying thoughtfully. "I'll be certain..."

"Don't worry, Spock." McCoy determined to lighten the intensity. "Jim wouldn't think of leaving me to fend with you alone."

"I'm not sure I know how the two of you managed to survive the past year," Kirk commented. "I'll bet Harris was glad you both left when you did. If you don't get back soon, he might decide he likes the Enterprise and wants to stay."

"I get it -- now you're trying to get rid of us. Well, Spock..."

Kirk collared him playfully. "Oh, no, you don't! You don't get off that easily, Doctor. We've got ten days left in which to enjoy ourselves and I intend to make the best of every minute of them. I'll..." he sobered suddenly. "... we'll have to say good-bye soon enough. Don't tease about it."

"No. No more goodbyes, Jim," Spock insisted.

"It will only be a few weeks," McCoy declared. "Then you'll be back home aboard the Enterprise."

Kirk frowned. "I seem to recall that line being used once before -- a year ago. 'Only a few weeks.' That's what I was told."

"Well, this time it's true," McCoy maintained. "Believe it, Captain."

Worry and tension were put aside as the three men continued to pursue a respite of pleasure. Several days after their excursion to town, they went to the beach. It was a beautiful, warm day and they went for a swim in the ocean's rough currents. Kirk luxuriated in the fresh awareness of his own physical prowess, swimming and diving and bouncing along with the waves. He felt strong, healthy, powerful and skillful in the familiar atmosphere.

Later, they lay exhausted on the warm sand, relaxing as the sun beat down upon them. After a while, Spock reached for a towel and sat up. Kirk blinked lazily at him.

"Where are *you* going?" he asked.

"One of us must dial for dinner reservations, or we shall reach town and be unable to secure accommodations," Spock responded. They had decided that morning on an elaborate feast at the local restaurant known for its excellent cuisine.

"I'll do it," Kirk offered, rising somewhat reluctantly. "You stay here and enjoy the sun."

Spock shook his head. "Unnecessary, Captain. I am on my way." To underscore his statement, Spock set off, trudging up the beach toward the cottage. Kirk stood and watched him depart.

McCoy stirred, studied the Captain's pose of irritation. "What's the matter?" he asked.

Kirk turned to face him, chagrined. "I don't know -- I guess I'm starting to feel like a dunsel. Neither of you want to let me do anything."

McCoy pulled a shirt over his head and brushed the sand off his legs. "Paranoid reaction, m'boy. Take advantage of your leisure," he replied, teasing.

"All seven days of it," Kirk chafed. He put out a hand, helped McCoy to his feet. "I'm so damned bored now, even Starfleet Command Headquarters will seem like excitement."

"Let's take a walk," McCoy suggested. He touched his friend's shoulder. "You lead the way."

Kirk nodded and set the pace. They walked toward the cliffs, strolling casually, then became intent upon their footing as they began to climb one of the gradual slopes.

McCoy silently approved Kirk's course, taking them back near the sight of Spock's accident. It showed a healthy adjustment to the incident, a sign of Kirk's returning self-image. Covertly, McCoy appraised Kirk's physical adjustment, too, and approved. The Captain was lithe, tan, the hollows in his frame now filled, his hair lightened by the sun. McCoy remembered with horror the emaciated man who had returned from Anthrania, scarred, limping, complexion a pasty gray. Now, Kirk once again looked like he belonged in command of a starship, as his corded, well-muscled legs purposefully picked a pathway up the cliff. His bronzed chest barely reflected

any strain from the climb.

They reached a small plateau and Kirk halted, casually resting his hands on his hips and staring out at the ocean. McCoy stopped a few feet behind him and followed Kirk's gaze.

"It's a pretty sight," the doctor reflected, "but it has nothing to compare to the majesty up there."

Kirk knew what he meant and his face grew thoughtful, troubled. "I haven't forgotten," he said softly.

"Sometimes I think you have," McCoy ventured. "All this planetside loveliness has been known to turn a spaceman's head."

"I've always loved the water, even before I was a 'spaceman', Bones. It's our heritage. The old ship's captains, the early explorations by sea -- before man even learned to fly. You must admit, it had its advantages." The breeze ruffled his hair; Kirk shoved it back from his face.

"Oh, sure. Pirates, piranhas and scurvy. Lots of advantages. Hostile natives, ships lost at sea, diseases... Charming," McCoy countered.

"Not too different than what we've encountered, Doctor. A man has to be... slightly crazy, I guess... to charter his life to such a profession."

"What else would you do?" McCoy asked quietly.

"I could request a ground assignment. I have the rank, the influence now. I'll wind up planetside eventually, whether it's now or in ten years." There was none of the attitude of fear and anxiety which he had displayed after his return from Anthrania. This time it was a cool considering, a pensive searching.

"Is that what you really want? Or are you trying to spite Starfleet by depriving them of a top line officer?"

Kirk turned to look at him sharply. "If that's all I wanted, I'd resign my commission." He turned back away. "No. If I belong anywhere in Starfleet, it's on the Enterprise."

"The problem is -- do you belong in Starfleet," McCoy clarified. "You can't have it both ways. Either the Enterprise or nothing. Command of that particular ship means a lot to you, but... is it strong enough, Jim, to support your doubts and your battered pride in the Federation?"

Kirk was thoughtful. "They left us there to die, Bones. To suffer. Okay, they *didn't* have to honor my confession. That's a point well taken. So they finally made a humane move. That doesn't explain the other ten months."

McCoy strode angrily to stand beside him. "Aren't you being just a bit sanctimonious, Captain? You expect a hell of a lot more than you're willing to give. *You* held out for ten months against the Anthranians. Well, so did the Federation. *You* knew the importance of an attempt to withhold the truth. So did they. Could you effectively serve an organization that whimpered and bowed down to enemy resistance on the first show of force? Don't expect Organian pacifism."

Kirk stared at him, checked by McCoy's outburst. McCoy went on, calmer. "I'm sorry, Jim, but believe me, I know. I was close to this thing the entire time you were gone. Everyone we talked to, everyone involved was sweating blood over the situation. And that was without knowing that the conditions of your incarceration were so horrifying. Later, from reports and taped transmissions, suspicion became more pronounced and we became more desperate. Everyone was actually relieved when the confession came through, but even if it had not, an intergalactic amnesty was being attempted. We'd have gotten you out of there somehow -- that's why the Anties pushed their hand when they did. Sure, the Federation held out -- but so did you. Until all hope was gone -- on both sides." Fondly, he rubbed Kirk's arm. "Jim, you were programmed with anti-Federation propaganda for ten months. See it for what it was."

"Six of my crew died while the Federation was attempting these ploys. What the hell good would an amnesty have done? We'd have been dead."

"I don't know," McCoy said miserably. "I don't have all the answers. I'm just a doctor. I don't make the decisions -- I'm not even consulted." *They just send you home and I have to put together the pieces that are left -- make repairs to body and soul... and for what? So you can nobly volunteer for another mission? And how much of you will come home next time, my friend?* McCoy struggled to bury the destructive thoughts. Pure emotionalism, Spock would call it, and this time, McCoy would agree with the criticism.

"I didn't listen to the propaganda, Bones," Kirk was saying, still irritated. "I didn't have to. I was too busy forming my own opinions. First, I excused the delay. Later... I tried to find reasons. Nothing I've heard since I've returned has seemed satisfactory."

"No," McCoy sighed. "And no answer will ever satisfy you, because you were a part of one of Starfleet's biggest blunders. But does that make the entire organization worthless? Does it negate all the good that is done, every day, all over this galaxy?"

"I'm not sure," Kirk admitted. "It's difficult to think of it in a precise, impersonal way."

"Well, I guess we've all been doing quite a bit of soul-searching, looking for answers. All I know for sure is that while Starfleet may not be perfect, it's the best alternative we have at present. Where would this galaxy be without them?"

Kirk stared fixedly at the sea. "Spock... feels the same way. I know it, even if he doesn't say it. He's... threatened by it... torn..."

Torn between you and his loyalty to Starfleet, McCoy qualified. And you know which would win, don't you?

Wearily, Kirk sat on a boulder and rubbed a hand over his eyes. "Bones, I'd like to be alone for a while, if you don't mind. I'll come down later."

McCoy patted his shoulder. He knew he had said everything he possibly could. The rest was up to Kirk himself. "Okay, Jim. Only -- try to remember the good, as well as the bad."

Kirk listened as McCoy's footfalls died away. *Remember the good... yes, there was that,* Kirk admitted. A life, interrupted by the Anthranian mission, a job, a home with which he'd been quite pleased. Kirk had worked hard to achieve his status as captain of a starship, always giving more than expected of him. Along the way he'd met many fine individuals who had helped form his opinion of Starfleet. Instructors at the Academy, good commanding officers, fellow cadets and shipmates -- and his own crew of officers aboard the Enterprise.

The Federation was wrong in the Anthranian case, but does that mean that the structure is weakening, or was it an isolated incident? And, if there are flaws in the system, do I call it quits because this time there was a personal injustice involved?

C'mon, James T. -- that's not your style.

Kirk stared out at the empty sea, at the waves dashing ruthlessly against the rocks below.

Spock sees the flaws. He, too, discovered the strengths and weaknesses of the organization we serve. Yet... he still wants to go back. He wants me to go back with him.

It meant a lot, Kirk knew, the unspoken decision of the Vulcan not to give up, to resume their life on the Enterprise. It told him that Spock had answered for himself the very same questions which Kirk was now raising. And Kirk had always valued Spock's judgment. It was a powerful voice in any decision he made.

Kirk forced himself to examine the alternatives away from Starfleet, throwing aside all

the goals of a lifetime. He found no satisfaction in the inspection. There was nothing else he wanted to do -- not badly enough to relinquish the career he had chosen.

Odd, Kirk thought, I hated myself and I hated Starfleet. Now, I've accepted myself and I guess I'm learning to accept Starfleet again. I've always had a touch of idealism, expecting perfection from myself, from others...

So, some of the images are a little shopworn. Still basically good, as McCoy pointed out.

McCoy -- escaping disillusion, he had fled to Starfleet, to be needed, to find a purpose in life. Kirk remembered his first encounter with the brusque physician who was destined to become such an important part of his life. *I was so young, so... ambitious and... optimistic.* And McCoy, the galaxy's ultimate cynic, had been a challenge, a soul seeking values.

Basically, nothing had changed, Kirk realized. McCoy -- Spock -- they were still waiting for his example. They were distinct individuals with strengths and weaknesses of their own, with ideals and opinions not always identical to his own, yet it seemed as if the outcome of their lives hinged on his decisions.

A few weeks ago he would have shied away from such responsibility, yet today he found himself considering the situation quite naturally. Its underlying significance did not occur to him.

On the Enterprise, Kirk was able to perform a job in which he believed, and he excelled at command because he enjoyed it and because he worked hard at it. A handful of bureaucrats were not going to destroy that for him. Ghi and the Anthranians were not going to destroy his entire life, either. Kirk refused to allow it.

Kirk remembered what he had once told McCoy about Starfleet: *'You'll stay... because here you know you're needed...'* It was still true. It was true for James Kirk. He was needed -- professionally and privately. Slowly, the pieces were beginning to fall into place, the answers were coming.

He stood and straightened cramped muscles, noticing for the first time that the sun was starting to sink below the horizon.

Night falls... and then a new day dawns. It always comes, whether we're ready to meet it or not. And I feel... I'm ready now... ready to go home.

When he reached the cottage, McCoy chided him for keeping them waiting, but Kirk noted with satisfaction that they had not come after him. Spock was in his own room, dressing for the trip to town, and impulsively Kirk stopped on his way to take a shower. He rapped lightly on the doorframe, then walked in.

"Got a minute?"

Spock adjusted the belt on his tunic and favored Kirk with a wry, uplifted eyebrow. "Only one, Captain?"

Kirk grinned. "Will you time me?"

Spock sat down, studiously brushed some lint from his trouser leg, then regarded Kirk with a look of patient fortitude. "No."

Kirk observed the action. "You're so damned... neat," he accused fondly. Spock looked at him strangely, perplexed. "Most of history's great men were sloppy, don't you know that? Look at Einstein..."

"Yes," Spock countered. "Look at Einstein. Consider what he may have achieved had he not been so disorganized."

Kirk shook his head, despaired of winning the debate. "Okay. I didn't come here to talk

about Einstein or neatness, anyway."

"What *did* you want?" Spock prompted when Kirk fell silent.

Kirk sat on the edge of Spock's bed and faced the Vulcan intently. "Do you remember the standard textbook at the Academy -- the first year, introductory course?"

"Peripherally -- not verbatim," Spock remarked, still puzzled.

"It was quite a definitive work. As a plebe, I memorized whole passages." Kirk smiled, whimsically nostalgic. "I doubt if I can quote any of it today, but at the time, it... struck a chord, reached something somewhere inside of me that had been prepared to receive it all my life. I... I can't negate that appeal, even if I try. I can't deny the personal commitment I made as a midshipman -- even before I ever took an official oath."

Spock sustained an attentive eye contact with Kirk for a long moment as if measuring the words. Then, very quietly, he quoted, " 'We serve... the varied and diverse civilizations of this galaxy... maintained by the standards of the United Federation of Planets. We shall strive to the utmost for perfection and dedication to those ideals...' "

"Yes." Kirk's eyes smiled at the Vulcan's gravity. "I told you -- when I returned from Anthranian -- that when I could see my future, you'd be the first to know." Kirk needed to say no more; he could see the gratitude and relief on his First Officer's face. It had been a long time since the chiseled features had relaxed, softened this completely.

"I am... pleased you have found your answers, Jim. And that you honor me by sharing them."

Kirk tilted his head to one side, musing. It seemed that as his own attitude grew stronger, Spock gradually lapsed back into the more deferential posture of old. "It's a small payment on a very large debt, my Vulcan friend."

An amused smile twinkled at Spock's lips. "Will you tell McCoy?"

"At dinner," Kirk promised, standing. "And if I don't hurry, none of us will eat." With a bounce to his step, Kirk headed for the shower.

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At last they were ready to leave the cottage. The surface car was loaded, all the necessary arrangements had been made, and the three men were set for the drive back to Starbase Headquarters. Tonight, Spock and McCoy would board a shuttle flight to rendezvous with the Enterprise. Tomorrow morning, Kirk would check in and begin his final evaluation.

Kirk was alone in the cottage. Spock and McCoy had gone to the nearby town to settle the last details, and to make arrangements for someone to come out to finish cleaning the house and return McCoy's aircar. After arranging the last of their possessions in the hold of the surface car, Kirk wandered back into the living area to await their return.

The rooms looked empty, bereft of everything they had brought along to stamp their identity upon them. It was quiet and Kirk could not help recalling the first day of their arrival. The charming cottage, so carefully selected by Spock, had been his refuge for three months. Kirk had loved it on sight, and through all the storms and agonies which had followed, he had never lost touch with the calming influences of house, beach and Vulcan.

My steadfast friend... you always seemed to know what I needed, even when I didn't know what it was myself. Spock had known, had made the decisions, had shown an empathy rare and precious at every step along the way. He had known when to send for McCoy, had been wise enough

to admit needing help in the struggle for Kirk's sanity.

Anthranea now seemed very far away, very long ago, as Kirk savored the afterglow of the times spent in this house. A battle had been fought here, more terrifying, in its way, than the one on Anthrania. It had been a battle waged with love and caring and compassionate friends. Kirk knew he would never be able to totally forget what had happened to him on Anthrania, but it receded in significance when matched to other unforgettable memories -- warm, comforting moments of shared truths and feelings.

Kirk thought about his Lady, trying to picture Jason Harris in the command chair -- *his* command chair. It rankled. *She's mine -- I won't give her up.* Someday, he knew, he'd be ready to move on, to take his life in other directions, but not yet. Now, he wanted to step back into that life which had been stolen from him over a year ago. He had come so far, and there was only a little farther to go.

Through the window, he saw the approach of the aircar. He watched as McCoy and Spock climbed out and started up the path. They had donned Starfleet uniforms for the trip home, and Kirk experienced a momentary sensation of pride and pleasure at the sight of the familiar blue-clad figures. As a surprise at the last minute, after they had left for town, Kirk had pulled out his own uniform and put it on, although he had planned to travel in casual clothes. He had approved his appearance in the mirror, marvelling at the comfort which he felt. Now, he turned to greet them as they came through the door.

" -- I don't care, Spock. I still say -- " McCoy was sputtering.

"Doctor, it is irrelevant in the essential order of things. You cannot expect -- "

"Hey!" Kirk cut in. "Hold it down, you two. What's so important that you have to argue about on this beautiful day?"

"Jim, this pig-headed Vulcan can't see the trees for the forest. He's so concerned over the ecological implications of defloration -- "

"Defloration?" Kirk interrupted again, amazed. "You're arguing about picking flowers?"

"Not just any flowers, Captain," Spock contributed. "You see... "

"Yes, I see." Kirk struggled to suppress a grin. "But if you think I'm riding all the way to Starbase Three with you arguing about flowers -- stow it, gentlemen!"

"Picking a bouquet for a lovely maiden never caused planetwide repercussions, far as I know," McCoy mumbled.

"Bones!" Kirk threatened.

"All right, all right." McCoy smiled guiltily. Then, in a delayed reaction, he noticed Kirk's uniform. "Captain -- " he exhaled in wonder. "You look... fine, Jim."

"Indeed," Spock commented intensely, his eyebrows gathering, conveying a delicate web of triumphant appreciation and complete approval.

Kirk felt suddenly self-conscious. "Well -- I couldn't have you two outrank me. Besides, I wanted us to match." He smiled, covering the sobriety of their reactions. "Are we ready to go, now?"

"We sure are," McCoy beamed. "I'd say we're definitely ready, Captain."

Outside, Kirk hopped into the pilot seat with unquestioned authority. They skimmed along leisurely, knowing there was ample time to reach the base, have dinner and wait for the shuttle. The day was perfect, the scenery lovely as they headed inland along nearly empty roads.

Almost half-way to their destination, they were suddenly startled by the approach of another, older-model vehicle, careening toward them, obviously out of control and picking up speed.

With a shouted warning, Kirk was forced to swerve to avoid a collision. Throwing on the braking mechanism, he watched with horror as the other reeling surfacecar veered off the road and crashed into a tree. Smoke erupted from the front end and a hatch flew open, releasing a woman from the pilot seat.

"My God!" Kirk jumped from the car, followed by McCoy and Spock. At the site of the crash, a teenaged boy and a small girl were being calmed by the woman.

"Get clear of here -- it might burn," Kirk warned quickly. He scooped the little girl into his arms, gesturing to McCoy to help the woman, who had gone numb with shock. They moved them away from the wreck. "Spock -- get that extinguisher out of our car -- " Kirk snapped. As the Vulcan took off, Kirk turned to McCoy. "Doctor?"

"She's all right, Jim -- just bruised and scared, aren't you, ma'am? Come here, son, let me see that arm."

Kirk gave the little girl a gentle squeeze. She burrowed closer to him, sobbing in fright. "It's okay, honey -- it's all right now," he soothed.

Spock rushed past with the extinguisher; Kirk saw that the car was beginning to burn, but that they were in time to prevent an explosion of the fuel tank.

"Jim," McCoy called him, " can you get my kit from the back seat?"

Kirk passed the child to her mother, giving them both a smile of reassurance. He returned to their car and was retrieving the medical pouch when Spock joined him.

"Immediate danger is averted, Captain."

"Good. Get on the transmitter, Spock, and notify the authorities." He looked toward the wreck. "What a mess. It's a miracle no one was seriously hurt."

He returned to the victims. McCoy set the boy's broken arm and gave the woman a sedative, while she tried to apologize and justify herself to Kirk. The circuits had failed, the small car lost control, and she had tried to bring it to a stop without hitting anything. Kirk assured her she'd done the right thing.

"The fact that you're all safe attests to that," he concluded.

The little girl, calmer now, looked up at him in curious fascination. "You're in Starfleet, aren't you?" she asked.

Her awe was oddly stimulating. Kirk nodded. "That's right."

"Thank God you were here," her mother sighed. "I didn't think I would panic, but... " she trailed off, shaking her head. The little girl persisted.

"Are you from the Starbase?"

"No." Kirk stooped beside her. "We're... we're from the starship Enterprise." He could say it, easily, and knew that he meant it. It was a satisfying thought.

Moments later, the emergency vehicles arrived and after a slight delay the three travelers climbed back in their own car to resume the journey.

McCoy leaned his head back against the seat and sighed. He reviewed the accident, again seeing Kirk in total command, he and Spock following his orders. There was a deep sense of rightness about the scene, a gratifying finish to a long, hard voyage.

When they arrived at the Starbase, Kirk checked into a room at the Starfleet Inn, while Spock and McCoy went to confirm their schedule. Later, they met for dinner at the port restaurant

where Spock and Kirk had often dined during the debriefing.

"Captain -- " Spock hesitated. "Are you certain you do not want me to put in for an extension of my leave? I could stay -- "

"Thank you, Mr. Spock, but, no. You've been away from the ship long enough on my account. When I come aboard, I want to see an efficient science department, ready to perform magnificently."

"You shall have it, Jim," Spock vowed.

They paid for their meal and walked out to the launching port. There would be no farewells; tacitly, they had all agreed upon it. Yet Kirk found this the hardest moment, to watch them leave while he was forced to remain behind. Everything in him wanted to go along -- now, Starfleet be damned. Although the delay was necessary, Kirk strained at the bureaucratic ropes which bound him here.

A metallic, computerized voice was announcing their shuttle code. McCoy pressed his arms.

"Jim?"

"I'll be home soon, Bones. Go on -- you'll miss your flight." Kirk's voice was tight with suppressed emotion. McCoy smiled confidently.

"Okay. Come on, Spock."

Kirk met the Vulcan's eyes in one long, perfect look of appreciation and anticipation. "Set up the chess board, Spock. Two out of three," he promised.

Then they were gone. Kirk stood alone -- no, never alone. Never totally alone, he reflected. Smiling to himself, he turned, ready to meet with Starfleet Command.

EPILOGUE

The transporter sparkle faded on the figure materializing on the platform, a man dressed in a new, well-fitting command gold uniform.

Montgomery Scott, activating the controls himself, snapped to attention, unsuccessfully trying to suppress a huge grin.

"Welcome aboard, Captain."

Kirk took a deep breath and let his eyes scan the familiar room for a moment before returning the Engineer's greeting. "Thank you, Mr. Scott. It's good to be back." He stepped down from the pad and crossed to the man at the console. Giving in to the excitement and joy of the event, Kirk reached out, taking the Scot's hand in both of his. "Good? Hell, it's great! How are you, Scotty?"

The older man's smile filled with warmth. "I'm fine, Captain, and yourself?"

"Anxious to go to work."

"Everything's ready. We'll take her out of orbit on your command, sir."

On your command... How right the words felt. At last he could command her again. He turned to McCoy and Spock, standing beside the console, and gave them a grin.

"We'll warp out at 0700," he instructed. "I'll be on the bridge." Spock and McCoy followed him out of the transporter room and into the ~~turbo~~lift.

The crew was expecting him. The scene on the bridge was informal, enthusiastic, and at times a little teary. Discipline was relaxed as the friends - the family - found it difficult to maintain the proper military attitude toward the commander for whom they had waited and worried about so long. Kirk, too, was hard-pressed to fill the role of 'Captain' when he wanted to embrace each one whose very existence had been his lifeline for so many long months.

At last the excitement settled down and order slipped comfortably back into place. Kirk eased himself into the familiar contours of his command chair, gazing out at the starfield.

It had been over a year since he had last sat in this place, a year in which his whole life had turned upside down. A tiny planet, so far removed from this world that now he had trouble even accepting its existence, had initiated a nightmare more devastating than all his previous experience could have conjured. It had been the beginning, the start of a long and winding road that included his return to this ship -- his ship -- not as her Captain, but as a passenger. There had been those months on Banoc-160, months of confusion and lost memories and a terror just as frightening as the ordeal on Anthrania. Now, it was over; the tortuous hunt to find himself was ended and he was back.

Home at last. Home is the hunter...

He heard the intercom on the arm of his chair making its familiar sound.

"It's 0700, Captain," Scott's voice filtered through, "all secure."

"Acknowledged." Kirk spoke with crisp precision. He paused a moment, smiling back at McCoy in his accustomed place behind the command chair, then met Spock's gaze across the bridge.

"Mr. Sulu, take us out of orbit."

On the viewscreen, Banoc-160 grew smaller as the giant silver starship warped toward new frontiers.





*There is nothing so great that I fear to do it for my friend;
nothing so small that I will disdain to do it for him.*

-- Sir P. Sidney



Aftermath

Words & Music

BY Martha Bonds

*Seems like I've been gone such a long time.
There is a home somewhere, but it's no longer mine.
Too many stars gone down, too many suns have set,
And still I don't know where I am yet.*

*So long ago I was a hunter.
The countless stars were my prey,
But somehow the tables turned,
I became the hunted one black day.*

*No where to turn, no one to guide me.
I am the captain of my soul.
Black is the pit of my nightmare,
And the morning light is cold.*

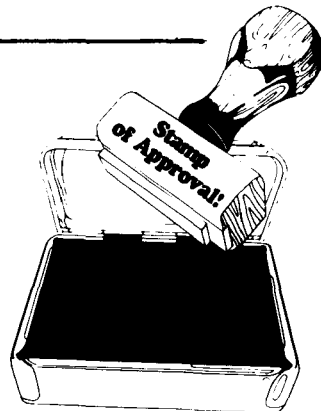
*Seems like I've been gone such a long time.
I see my eternity, to reach it I must climb.
What will it take to find my way again?
It may take a mountain, it may take a friend.*

*Now through the dark your hands are reaching
To touch the pain inside my heart.
I must hear the words you're teaching
Before the healing time can start.*

*I am falling, can you catch me?
Can you return what I have lost?
Can I come back now, do you need me?
Will love replace what time has cost?*

*Seems like I've been gone such a long time.
I see a home out there and know it can be mine.
So many stars gone down, so many suns have set,
But with you beside me, I know I'll try again.
I know I'll try again.*

We Reach.....



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*The firmest friendships have been formed
in mutual adversity; as iron is most strongly
united by the fiercest flame.*

-- Colton





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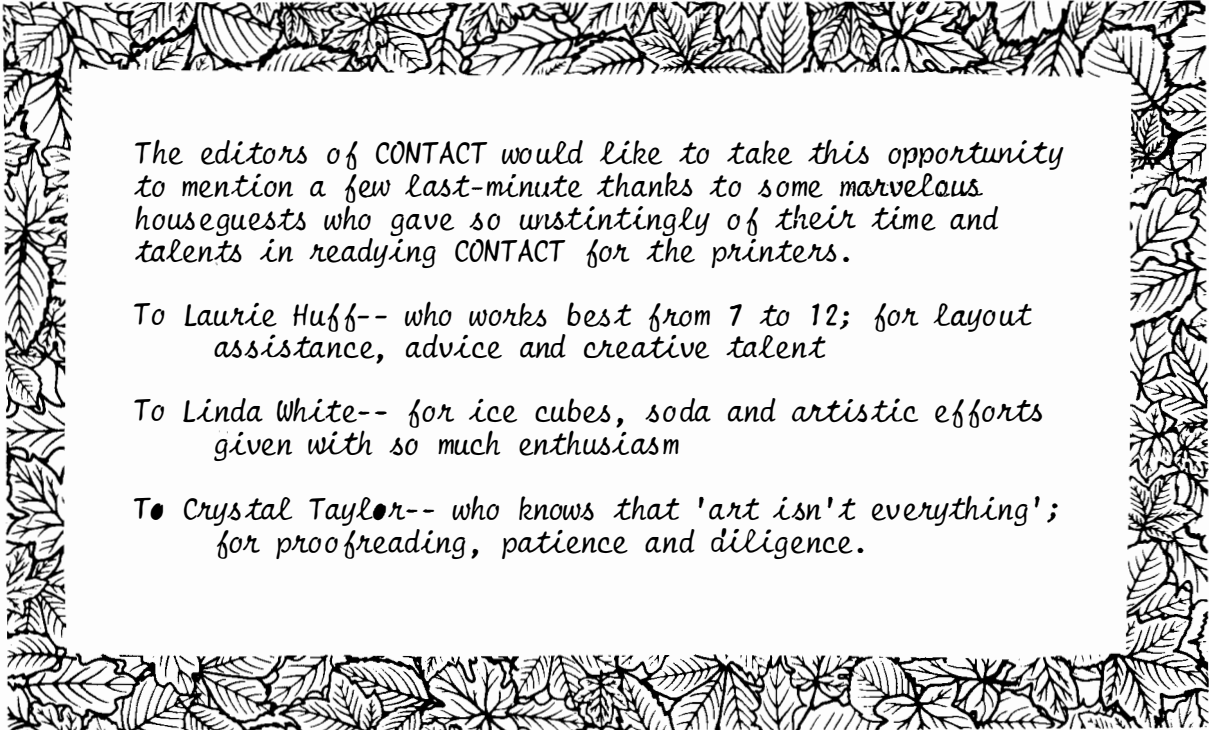
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No publication date. For further information as it becomes available, send a S.A.S.E. to the CONTACT address.



The editors of CONTACT would like to take this opportunity to mention a few last-minute thanks to some marvelous houseguests who gave so unstintingly of their time and talents in readying CONTACT for the printers.

To Laurie Huff-- who works best from 7 to 12; for layout assistance, advice and creative talent

To Linda White-- for ice cubes, soda and artistic efforts given with so much enthusiasm

To Crystal Taylor-- who knows that 'art isn't everything'; for proofreading, patience and diligence.

STAR DREAMER

The sound of music fills my ears --
A new adventure calls,
Come, be one with me,
In this magical, fantasy-flight to the stars.
Let us soar on gossamer wings
Among exotic alien worlds
Burning hot in space.
You and I together -- we shall face the unknowns,
Discover truths now hidden from our minds,
Share the secrets of uncharted voids.

As a small child, I dreamed
Of what I would become --
One, with infinity
Lost -- and found -- in my solitary domain.
The universe folded back upon me
To reveal itself in splendid array,
The wonders my eyes would behold.
Yet the music was discordant.
Though I did not perceive it
I had not realized I needed a friend.
Touch my soul and be a part of me.

Now, the song is complete
In perfect harmony.
You were the lost chord
At last we create the perfect symphony.
A jeweled web of starlight
The bold cadence of danger
Come, see my dream world with me.
Wander the pathways between suns
Bright blazing orbs
Dazzling, haunting
Cold forbidden spheres
Barren, desolate
But never lonely -- it is ours.

Beverly Volker

